

Description, Projection, and Charles Dickens

George Henry Lewes's essay 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1872, enters midway into what he himself describes as a 'digression': an anecdote about 'a patient who believed he had transformed into a bear'.¹ In a rhetorical move we may now recognise from other ambivalent critical encounters – from Gaskell, James, and Chesterton – Lewes takes a sideways approach to an alternative understanding of the novel. Rather than a material text, an aesthetic work, or a faithful picture of the world, his anecdote reclasses Dickens's novels as *imagined experiences*, albeit by means of a dangerous comparison:

[T]hat abnormal condition in which a man hears voices, and sees objects, with the distinctness of direct perception, although silence and darkness are without him; these *revived* impressions, revived by an internal cause, have precisely the same force and clearness which the impressions originally had when produced by an external cause. In the same degree of vividness are the images *constructed* by his mind [...] with the distinctness of objective reality; when [the patient] imagines that he himself has been transformed into a bear, his hands are seen by him as paws.²

'Returning from this digression', Lewes continues, 'To [Dickens] also *revived* images have the vividness of sensations; to him also *created* images have the coercive force of realities [...] When he imagined a street, a house, a room, a figure, he saw it not in the vague schematic way of ordinary imagination, but in the sharp definition of actual perception, all the salient details obtruding themselves on his attention'.³ As his essay acknowledges, the association between literary genius and madness is not a new one, but Lewes uses the specific psychology of hallucinatory madness to articulate a particular sensory feature of Dickens's creativity: much as the mad patient sees the image of his bear paws 'with the distinctness of objective reality',⁴ the novelist is allegedly capable of envisioning fictional scenes and objects with 'the sharp definition of actual perception'. By emphasising 'vividness' and 'clearness', 'details' and 'distinctness' – particularly

in opposition to the 'vague' and 'schematic' – Lewes characterises Dickens with what modern photography might term a *high definition* imagination.

For the man who introduced the word 'realism' into English literary criticism as a principle about 'the representation of Reality, i.e., of Truth', with this digression, Lewes reframes much of his own criteria for 'realistic' art. The essay appears generally disparaging, assuming 'a series of positions' which Tyson Michael Stolte argues 'have come to represent standard ways of attacking [Dickens]', but it also acknowledges the extent to which such criticisms miss the point of their objects, requiring a turn to other (for instance, psychological) ways of understanding.⁵ As many of Dickens's critics have found, the novelist's characters strike Lewes as 'caricatures and distortions of human nature [...] moving like pieces of a simple mechanism'; a critique similarly formulated by James in 1865, describing the cast of *Our Mutual Friend* as 'lifeless, forced, mechanical [...] animated by no principle of nature whatever'.⁶ Yet, as Lewes goes on to point out, these clunky machines have nonetheless 'established themselves in the public mind like personal experiences', so engrained that 'Against such power criticism was nearly idle. In vain critical reflection showed these figures to be merely masks [...] these unreal figures affected the uncritical reader with the force of reality'.⁷ This is not only a condescension on 'the uncritical reader', but the recognition of a different kind of realist power which 'critical reflection' has failed to acknowledge: the production of unreal objects and experiences with 'the force of reality', rather than as 'the representation of Reality'. Just as Lewes finds his patient 'willing to admit that the idea of such a transformation was utterly at variance with all experience', but still 'remained fixed in his mind [on] the image of himself under a bear's form', novel readers already know that Dickens's characters are not real (nor even realistic), but remain 'affected' by them, weeping over the death of Little Nell as if it had or even could have happened.⁸ 'There is no power of effacing such conviction by argument', Lewes writes of his ursine patient, and likewise, a critique of the novel's artifice offers no purchase on its explicitly artificial, but nonetheless impactfully real, experience.⁹

'Dickens in Relation to Criticism' therefore moves to assume a different critical function than insisting in 'vain' why certain novels ought or not to feel real, turning instead to the psychology of hallucinations to model how fictions project their own reality. By opening a theoretical distinction between the novel's persuasiveness (as plausible, accurate, or faithful representations of the world) and its experiential force (as 'constructed' or 'created' images), perhaps even by offering the latter as an alternative

realism, Lewes's essay is more sympathetic to Dickens than what Rosemarie Bodenheimer, for instance, has perceived as 'a long and predictable attack on Dickens's "incorrect" and "false" depictions of human character [...] couched in the authoritative language of the mental sciences'.¹⁰ Lewes takes the incorrectness for granted – useless to protest the actual absurdity of bear paws – to attend to the concreteness of the image. Rather than authority, what the mental sciences offer Lewes and (as we will see) his contemporaries are relevant, if often dangerous analogies for real-but-not-actual experiences: in memory, daydreaming, and hallucination, individuals similarly conjure and take pleasure in objects not materially present, nor subject to the standards of material reality. Victorian scientists and critics generally stop short of endorsing a literary function which bears comparison to examples of mental illness, but theorisations such as Lewes's essay suggest an escape from the binary upon which Dickens's fictions are judged to be either true to life or fatally unrealistic – and at the potential of the science behind hallucination to articulate a category of the real, but unrealistic; the palpable, but non-material. By comparing novel fiction to the imagined objects of diseased minds, these writers speculated about its virtuality.

Taking its cue from Lewes's essay, this chapter reconstructs a nineteenth-century debate over the vividness, palpability, or concreteness of fictions – a historical theory of virtual experience – as an intervention into our presently diminished sense of these qualities. In the period, Lewes contributed to a wider cultural discourse with strong anxieties about experiencing absent or imagined things: 'seeing' a room described by a novel, 'talking' to imaginary people, or 'believing' in the actions of play. Such anxieties collected particularly around the case of Hartley Coleridge, whom critics and doctors claimed to have experienced hallucinatory sensations and delusional beliefs about his imaginary world. (Although Hartley's life, as we will see, reveals no evidence of such symptoms – only a practice of virtual play.) At the same time, critics also acknowledged the experiential vividness of characters or scenes as an inherent appeal of literature, and commonly suggested the skill of conveying vividness to depend on the author's own 'belief' in their creations: that Dickens 'seeing [his fiction] vividly, made us also see it; and believing in its reality however fantastic, he communicated something of his belief to us [...] that even while knowing it was false we could not help, for a moment, being affected, as it were, by his hallucination'.¹¹ Both sides of this historical debate about the sense experience of fiction, both as a literary power *and* a psychological hazard, appear hopelessly quaint today – few in the world of

modern cinema, VR headsets, or cultural fantasies of the hologram are concerned about the hallucinatory reality of novels.

Yet these accounts are useful because, precisely in their now expired anxieties, they recover a perspective on the novel as an experience of imaginary objects and environments – which, if not at all scientifically or medically accurate, nonetheless enables us to reassess a real and under-examined literary function. As this book has argued throughout, current approaches to the Victorian novel neglect its value and uses as a medium for artificial realities, an inherent capacity which their contemporary readers and writers consciously avoided or exploited. I have proposed the different kinds of pleasure and meaning to living vicariously in fictional worlds, as distinct from the novel's representational, aesthetic, or narrative value. In what follows, I argue that the period's concerns about the vivid perceptibility of fictions suggest (or exaggerate into anxiety) what Lowe has described as the 'sensuous-imaginative function, which, though it is a function of all fiction to a greater or lesser extent, has been under-theorized'.¹² Like Lewes, we need a criticism that accounts for how novels provide 'personal experiences' of their imagined-material worlds, and what they offer through this mode of engagement. By examining what Victorians feared the novel could do, but which we have since ceased to apprehend, I suggest what the novel *can* do through the felt reality of its places and things.

The Luxury of Fictional Objects

'In June 1828', Brontë recounted a year later, 'we erected a school on a fictitious island' (*EW* 22). This record of play and writing exercise, entitled 'A Description of Vision Island',¹³ employs the prose equivalent of what architects call a *fly-through sequence*: the depiction (usually simulated) of a designed space 'as if captured on film by a roving camera'.¹⁴ A floating point of view descends to show us around the imagined domain, sweeping over its geographical area, '[more] like the region of enchantment or a beautiful fiction than sober reality [...] made terribly sublime by mighty rocks, rushing streams and roaring cataracts' (22); then the school's grounds, where 'clear lakes [...] seemed the crystal, emerald-framed mirrors of some huge giant' (23); then its building, 'a magnificent [*sic*] palace of pure white marble, whose elegant and finely wrought pillars and majestic turrets seem the work of mighty genii and not of feeble men' (23); then the entrance, accessed by 'a flight of marble steps [...] which leads into a hall surrounded by Corinthian pillars of white marble' (23);

and then a detailed inventory of the furnishings, moving progressively through the halls and rooms:

From this hall you pass onto another splendid and spacious apartment all hung with rich, deep, crimson velvet; and from the grand dome is suspended a magnificent lustre of fine gold, the drops of [which] are pure crystal. The whole length of the room run long sofas covered also with crimson velvet. At each end are chimney-pieces of dove-coloured Italian marble, the pillars of which are of the Corinthian order, fluted and wreathed with gold. From this we pass into a smaller but very elegant room, the sofas of which are covered with light blue, velvet flowers with silver and surrounds [*sic*] with small, white marble columns. (23–24)

Nothing happens in the ‘Description’. The narration never coalesces around an embodied perspective from which a story might emerge, following no perceptible narrative logic except the exhibition of an open house: from the surroundings to the grounds, exterior to interior, room ‘pass[ing] onto’ room. Nor does much more happen on ‘Vision Island’ hereafter. At the end of a narrative written four months later (‘The School Rebellion’), the only tale to be set on the island and whose action never enters the palace, the siblings ‘becoming tired of it, sent the children off to their own homes and now only fairies dwell in the Island of a Dream’ (104). The juvenilia never return to this location.

As is often the case, paracosmic fiction baffles our usual modes of approach, investing its efforts to other ends or at cross-purposes to what interpretation ordinarily seeks to ‘get out’ of a text. Vision Island and its riches exemplify what Brontë would later repudiate, in her preface to *The Professor*, as ‘the ornamented and redundant in composition’ (*TP* 3), offering three sets of Corinthian pillars where there could be one (or just as well, none), each separately accounted for in colour, size, and fluting, appearing to support no greater object beyond themselves. Brontë points out the wastefulness of her early work, its elaboration of material specifics which ultimately serve no narrative function; yet wasteful is not the same as useless. She criticises its functional redundancy, but in the same instant acknowledges an explicit function – to ornament – implicitly discounted as a legitimate purpose of fiction. The ‘Description’ is clearly satisfying, and at the same time critically confounding, because it indulges in imagining material excess, or even further, in constructing and decorating a fantasised domain with all the gold and marble a twelve-year-old can think to demand. It is not as if Brontë no longer recalls these motives of her juvenilia, but that they no longer suffice for – are in fact antipathetic to – the purposes of writing as a novelist. The ‘Description’ embodies as a

whole those stray ‘notations’ of the realist novel Barthes declares as ‘scandalous (from the point of view of structure), or, what is even more disturbing [...] a kind of narrative *luxury*, lavish to the point of offering many “futile” details and thereby increasing the cost of narrative information’.¹⁵ If it is exactly the gratuitousness of fiction which most appeals to the child – capable of every luxury at zero cost – Brontë and Barthes conversely suggest that nothing comes free in the novel, where the textual economy demands repayment with certain prescribed forms of literary value.

The development of the realist novel, biographically for Brontë as historically for Barthes, involves a new and contradictory set of demands for functional and ‘objective’ detail. Attempting to define the form – one to theorise, the other to practice – from other, preceding kinds of writing, both identify the changing value of description for meeting the needs of a new verisimilitude; but in so doing, I argue, write off the concrete and experiential as aspects of the novel. In ‘The Reality Effect’, Barthes notes two classical typologies for description allegedly left behind by realism: ‘euphrasis, the detachable set-piece (thus having its end in itself, independent of any general function), whose object was to describe places, times, people, or works of art’; and ‘*hypotyposis*, whose function was to ‘put things before the hearer’s eyes’, [...] by imparting to representation all the lustre of desire’.¹⁶ As he looks ‘ahead to Flaubert’, such motives are overtaken by the new imperatives of a ‘realistic description [which] avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity’.¹⁷ The structural analysis of description by these standards must look either for narrative signification – a character’s piano acting ‘as an indication of its owner’s bourgeois standing’ – or else for the production of a ‘reality effect’, a backdrop of nominal particulars codifying (an illusion of) the narrative’s objectivity.¹⁸ These rationales, rather than the goals of classical description, constitute Barthes’s explanation for the characteristic clutter of novel worlds, the bric-a-brac of material information which seems to exceed structure and yet ‘forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity’.¹⁹ As James Wood puts in summation, ‘Nineteenth-century realism, from Balzac on, creates such an abundance of detail that the modern reader has come to expect [...] a certain superfluity, a built-in redundancy, that [narrative] will *carry more detail than it needs*’.²⁰ By rejecting the fantasmatic for a new division between the necessary and the redundant, however ‘built-in’, Brontë’s reassessment of her juvenilia exhibits (or appears to exhibit) her gradual assumption of ‘realist’ demands.²¹

Yet 'waste', as James wrote of the baggy monsters, 'is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from "counting"', a calculation to which he too applied his own metrics of value.²² This book argues for an expansion of what 'counts' in the novel, specifically to include the disparaged value – not exactly aesthetic, nor directly moralising, and certainly not historical – of the form as a medium for artificial experience. On Vision Island, nobody finally sits on either the crimson or light blue velvet sofas, but to read about their placement is to feel how it might nonetheless be satisfying to *have* them there – or entangled with this sense of possession, to describe and perceive them as being there. What Lowe has described as the 'virtual presence of sensual particularities' represents a mode of relation to fictions clearly distinct from their metaphorical or metonymic interpretation, and also more subtly distinct from their aesthetic expression in language.²³ The details of Brontë's upholstery are pleasurable beyond prose because they derive their value as concrete qualities of the object imagined by description, rather than as verbal qualities of the description itself. Moreover, instead of the objectivity signalled by a reality effect, the 'Description' repeatedly evokes the power to bring subjective realities into virtual being: from the very space itself, explicitly 'a fictitious island' (*EW* 22) but evidently firm enough to build on, to natural features which more slyly 'seemed' the playthings 'of some huge giant', to architecture which suggest 'the work of mighty genii and not of feeble men' (23). The young Brontë writes not only to compose a literary text, but to craft and place fictional objects, investing care and quality into their immaterial construction and arrangement: 'At each end are chimney-pieces of dove-coloured Italian marble, the pillars of which are of the Corinthian order, fluted and wreathed with gold' (23). Such objects ask not to be understood, nor believed in, nor read aloud (the subclause on the pillars is particularly awkward), but imagined as the homemade artefacts of a godlike author. By this alternative criteria, their abundance of detail is not more than they need, but as much as they want.

The gratuitous luxuries of the 'Description', precisely by their 'scandalous' indifference to traditional functions, incite us to imagine other motives for realism's fixation with material details; ones closer to the 'lustre of desire' with which Barthes's rhetoricians conjured through language just what they wanted to see. '*Middlemarch* is a treasure-house of details', James wrote in his 1873 review, 'Its diffuseness [. . .] makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction'.²⁴ Perhaps the most extravagant vision the 'Description' might put before our eyes is that of the novel as exactly this kind of repository for 'pure fiction', providing like the 'fictitious island' a ground

on which imagined objects can be placed, sustained, and valued for the vicarious experience of their details. Though ‘of course, [the novelist] provides incident and plot’, as Leavis deprecated of Thackeray, satirising the incidental nature of these components in his later novels, something else is being offered by the concreteness of the bodies and objects involved which Leavis can register only as a waste of text and time.²⁵ Davis protests of the concreteness itself that ‘When we “see” a house in a novel, there is really nothing “there”, and, worse, there is really no “there” for a “there” to be. The house we “see” in our mind is [. . .] a cultural phenomenon with recognizable signs to tell us what kind of a house, what class, whose taste, and so on’.²⁶ There is indeed no ‘there’, but what else than ‘plot’ or ‘signs’ might we see in the novel if we *pretend* that ‘there’ is? How might a participatory experience of explicitly fictional objects subvert, or differently fulfil, a novel’s narrative or cultural aims?

Play’s anomalousness can help to reorient criticism towards such questions of alternative function and value, enabling us to perceive other uses for the novel’s distinctive fictions of reality. Such is the argument and methodology of this book, but also a historical statement about a general capacity, because play performed a similar function for the nineteenth century’s own critics in *their* engagements with contemporary theories of subjective realities and imagined experiences. Before turning to Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* and the novel’s uses for its fictional objects, I want to register the role of play and (by cautionary association) hallucination in providing literary critics of this period with a heuristic for the ‘real but not actual’. Influenced both by older concepts of poetic imagination and new psychologies of perception, such critics were engaged in a similar task of revealing the sensuous or fantasmatic functions of fiction as I have attempted to show through Brontë’s ‘Description’. Moreover, they do so by drawing on similar examples from paracosmic play – as we will see, especially from the case of Hartley Coleridge. Yet the stakes of this historical criticism are also directly inverse to ours: whereas after the twentieth century such functions have been obscured by the easy dismissal of subjective illusions (‘there is really nothing “there”’), nineteenth-century accounts of ‘seeing’ fictional objects are produced by acute anxieties about the potential for hallucination (that individuals might lose consciousness of what is really ‘here’).²⁷ Recovering these alarmist perspectives offers a strong corrective to our partial and disenchanting view of fiction’s capacities, as well as a cultural concept of the virtual as it was forming embryonically in debates about perceiving fiction’s non-existent things. By this digression we

might relearn a criticism that 'sees things' (perhaps too much) in literature, so as to approach the novel from a more credulous vantage.

'The Spurious Resemblance'

So how to see an object which is not there? In the associationist school of epistemological philosophy which dominated psychological study in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, there is a crucial distinction between the *sensation* and the *idea* of an object. Philosophers such as 'John Locke, David Hume, and David Hartley' – Hartley Coleridge is named after the last – proposed 'that humans develop rational consciousness by the accretion and mental combination of sense experiences', foundational to which was an explanation of how sense experiences last beyond the moment of immediate experiencing; in other words, how the sight of an object sticks around in the mind to accrete and combine after the object has gone out of sight.²⁸ 'It is a known part of our constitution', James Mill writes in 1829, 'that when our sensations cease, by the absence of their objects, something remains. After I have seen the sun, and by shutting my eyes see him no longer, I can still think of him'.²⁹ In blocking out the sight of the sun, Mill's mind still carries its remnant, and the difference between them is the difference between 'two classes of feelings; one, that which exists when the object of sense is present; another, that which exists after the object of sense has ceased to be present. The one class of feelings I call *sensations*; the other class of feelings I call *ideas*'.³⁰ Sue Zemka's reading of Mill rightly emphasises 'the temporal premise of this model', a story of before and after-thought, but Mill's definition here also draws another, more static distinction between two types of access to an object in its material presence and absence.³¹ In his footnote on Mill's text, Alexander Bain goes on to make this additional point:

Another distinction between the Sensation and the Idea, is of the most vital importance. To the Sensation belongs Objective Reality; the Idea is purely Subjective. This distinction lies at the root of the question of an External World; but on every view of that question, objectivity is connected with the Sensation; in contrast to which the Idea is an element exclusively mental or subjective.³²

Mill's thought experiment with the sun, in terms of this distinction, produces not only a progression forward in time but a switch between worlds or realities. Sensations are produced by objects of the world outside, and the idea is an object of the world inside – the world that appears when we close our eyes.

This conceptual component of associationism provided a logical structure for succeeding writers to theorise about other kinds of non-material sense experiences.³³ The most sensational of these was ‘the maniacal hallucination’, which James Cowles Prichard defined in his 1822 *Treatise on the Diseases of the Nervous System* as a condition which ‘represents unreal objects as actually present [...] the creations of reverie or imagination, are presented to the mind in such vivid colours as to produce a similar effect to actual perceptions’, in some cases ‘so intense in its operation as to carry [the patient] away from the influence of his external perceptions, and to environ him with visions of unreal scenes’.³⁴ Hallucination, for medical psychologists throughout the century, would be so understood as a disorder of the relation between sensation and idea, complicated by the imagination’s ability to create ideas without original objects of sense; for instance, Robert MacNish’s 1834 work *The Philosophy of Sleep* describes a state of ‘perception, independently of the usual cause [that is] the presence of external bodies [...] the result is a series of false images or sounds, which are often so vivid as to be mistaken for realities’.³⁵ Such accounts emphasise the intrasubjective nature of the hallucinatory object, having no external material presence or cause even in the malfunction of sensory organs. As John Abercrombie’s *Inquiries Concerning the Intellectual Powers* argues in 1849, ‘the hallucination of mind, or a belief of the real existence of the object [...] [does] not consist on false impressions on the senses, but depend upon the mind mistaking its own conceptions for real and present existences’.³⁶ The apparent ‘struggle [...] betwixt illusive and real sensations’, according to Henry Holland in his 1852 *Chapters on Mental Physiology*, made hallucination so clear-cut a psychological phenomenon that it represented a paradigmatic mental illness: ‘If it were an object to obtain a description of insanity, which might apply to the greatest cases of such disorder, I believe this would be found [...] [in] the loss, partial or complete, of power to distinguish between unreal images created within the sensorium and the actual perceptions drawn from the external senses, thereby giving to the former the semblance and influence of realities’.³⁷

Literary critics, moreover, identified another striking analogy for these liminal or metaleptic experiences – objects which transgress between inner and outer worlds – in the fictions of play, that which De Quincey would come to describe as the psychic hardening of a ‘shadow into a rigor of reality far denser than the material realities of brass or granite’ (*AS* 47). Such critics found their most prominent example in 1851, two years after Hartley Coleridge’s death (from bronchitis), when Derwent’s publication

of his brother's *Poems* and biography brought imaginary worlds into public scrutiny as semi-literary instances of 'unreal objects [...] actually present'.³⁸ Derwent's account of Hartley's play became the focus of the *Poems'* reviews in the press, especially his suggestion that the world of Ejuxria 'became for [Hartley] more real and important than the matter-of-fact world in which he had to live' (HC xl–xli). On Hartley's 'shadowy (but to him most actual) realm', a language which recalls De Quincey's *Sketches*, the reviewer at *Bentley's Miscellany* presented the portrait of a child 'believing in his own tale [...] he had hardly become conscious of the difference between fact and fiction'.³⁹ *Fraser's Magazine* similarly suggested Hartley to be 'a most firm believer in his own inventions, and continued to inhabit his ideal world so long, that it assumed in his mind an equal consistency with the real, till at last he became quite incapable of distinguishing truth from fiction'.⁴⁰ *The Gentleman's Magazine* considered the account 'well worth recording for the consideration of psychologists', noting that while 'in ordinary cases these brain-creations [...] pass like the day-dreams of maturer age in swift succession, having no coherency, and leaving no trace', Hartley's exceptional case led him to 'preserve the outward form of the fiction from its natural dissolution'.⁴¹ *The Christian Remembrancer*, more generally admiring about 'the fairy land of this young genius', is nevertheless troubled by 'the strength of the illusion which seemed to possess him, and his unwillingness to believe it a dream [...] he seemed not to be able to distinguish between reality and pretence'.⁴²

It is important to clarify, at this point as I argue elsewhere, that such interpretations in fact mistake the nature of 'belief' in play and fiction. There is no evidence, only continual restatements of Derwent's impression, that Hartley or other children lost the double consciousness intrinsic to pretence, the virtual, and the novel as 'believable stories that did not solicit belief'.⁴³ This growing misdiagnosis of Hartley's practices reveals, for one, the still incomplete availability of a concept of non-material concreteness; and for another, the recapitulation of Platonic arguments on fiction through the new idiom of psychology. 'By the 1850s', Shuttleworth observes, 'Hartley became a definitive model of a ruined childhood: indulged by his parents in his imaginative passion for creating alternative lands, he had been trapped for ever in an unhealthy childhood, hindered from making the necessary progression into adulthood'.⁴⁴ Compounding these stakes in 1860, the psychologist James Crichton-Browne's lecture and essay 'Psychical Diseases of Early Life' cited Hartley's case as part of his argument on child insanity:

[I]n childhood, [delusions] are frequently induced by castle-building, and we would here take an opportunity of denouncing that most pleasant but pernicious practice. Impressions, created by the ever fertile imagination of a child [. . .] are soon believed in as realities, and become a part of the child's psychological existence. They become, in fact, actual delusions. Such delusions are formed with facility, but eradicated with difficulty [. . .] [children] ought to be allowed little opportunity to 'Give to airy nothings a local habitation and a name'.⁴⁵

A long excerpt from Derwent's memoir immediately follows this passage, as well as from Jameson's essay 'A Revelation of Childhood', which had similarly been singled out by reviews of her 1855 *Common-Place Book* as being 'the most interesting passages in the book [. . .] valuable from its psychological character' and of 'affording [. . .] excellent cautions of sound practical quality and real psychological moment'.⁴⁶ The inclusion of these cases in Crichton-Browne's work represents the accumulative consensus of literary critics who repeatedly referred this group of paracosmic biographies 'for the consideration of psychologists'; even as such critics originally interpreted them through scientific (mis)conceptions of fictional experience as shades of diseased belief.⁴⁷

The problem at hand, in this medical-literary feedback loop and its reductive drive towards diagnosis, is the danger of a comparison which overshoots its analytical usefulness. This is particularly evident in 'Psychical Diseases', for one, in its failure to address the implications of identifying Hartley and Jameson as examples of 'delusional insanity' in children, when both survived to be (by fairly public account) more or less sane adults. Despite his alcoholism and career disappointments, Hartley was never suspected of hallucinatory madness during his lifetime – did not, for instance, claim to others that he had bear claws for hands – and Jameson, a well-respected art and literary writer, even less so. For another, Crichton-Browne also raises, by oblique reference, the problem of theatrical illusion as an analogous but more ambivalently pathological form of unreality. By warning against the 'airy nothings' of play, he quotes from the final act of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, from Theseus's speech that 'The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact' (5.1.4–5):

THESEUS And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(5.1.14–17)

The allusion is especially appropriate for articulating anxieties with the 'shapes', 'forms', and 'bodies' of the paracosm as a 'local habitation': the delusion of a "there" for a "there" to be'.⁴⁸ But it is also one whose significance in the play – an ambiguity between the illusions of madness, love, and poetry – attaches implicatively onto its usage as a caution against 'actual delusions'. Crichton-Browne's determination of play as psychologically dangerous, with a clear prescription for abstinence, is complicated first by the (symptomatically speaking) unspectacular lives of its alleged sufferers, and second, by a broader range of concrete but subjective experiences beyond hallucination. If the logic of madness offers a conceptual handle on such experiences, allowing critics to identify and refer to something of 'real psychological moment', it is also unhelpfully loaded with the social and medical baggage of real disease.⁴⁹

A similar problem of slippery pathologisation also troubled equivalent investigations on fictional experience. Given the overextension to which hallucination has already been taken as a comparison for imaginative experience, Lewes is being somewhat optimistic by assuming in 1872 that 'Psychologists will understand *both the extent and the limitation* of the remark, when I say that in no other perfectly sane mind [than Dickens] [...] have I observed vividness of imagination approaching so closely to hallucination'.⁵⁰ More cautiously than the use of this same comparison by Crichton-Browne, the analogy of the 'perfectly sane' Dickens to the explicitly insane bear-patient jostles back and forth within the tentative limits Lewes sets on his argument, a space he takes (and has) great trouble demarcating:

I am very far indeed from wishing to imply any agreement in the common notion that 'great wits to madness nearly are allied;' on the contrary, my studies have led to the conviction that nothing is less like genius than insanity, although some men of genius have had occasional attacks; and further, that I have never observed any trace of the insane temperament in Dickens's works, or life, they being singularly free even from the eccentricities which often accompany exceptional powers; nevertheless, with all due limitations, it is true that there is considerable light shed upon his works by the action of the imagination in hallucination.⁵¹

The proliferating conjunctions and subclauses of this single sentence – confirming, denying, and conceding at every turn – mark out the thin line upon which Lewes's argument must walk between defending Dickens's sanity and advancing a literary theory *modelled on* a paradigmatic form of

insanity. Genius is not 'allied' to madness but 'on the contrary', 'very far' from it and 'nothing is less like', 'although' they sometimes occur together; in any case, Dickens 'never' manifests any actual insanity, not 'even [...] the eccentricities which often accompany' genius; 'nevertheless, with all due limitations', that mental illness which is claimed to be both the antithesis of genius and its frequent accompaniment will shed 'considerable light' on the work of an author for whom Lewes has already denied 'any trace' of illness. This frenetic, see-sawing passage attempts to capitalise on the likeness of imagination to hallucination while actively avoiding the diagnostic or prescriptive implications of their equivalence, overcorrecting its trajectory as the argument oscillates between the insights and dangers of comparison.

At stake in this account is not the history of intellectual transmission between literary and medical theory, nor the ways they in fact distort each other, but a sense of the more difficult task Lewes is attempting in this essay: to work obliquely at an unknown object with an imperfect tool; to produce knowledge through 'digression'. P. R. Marland, in his reading of 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', argues:

I do not think making a pathology of genius – that is, in slightly less loaded terms, the capacity for producing verbal prodigies – is very helpful or accurate. To imply that Dickens wrote so well because he suffered from a benign madness is not just wrong but impertinent, both misunderstanding and deprecating the writing. Yet literary practice, certainly fictional practice, demands 'seeing things' at an illusory, if not hallucinatory, level.⁵²

The track of Lewes's argument is not so different, I would argue, from the 'Yet' on which Marland's own objection turns. Reaching for the nearest thing to a contemporary understanding of the virtual, Lewes's reference to hallucination aims not at 'a pathology of genius' but at an investigation of how we experience the imaginary. In this, he succeeds and echoes Charles Lamb's 1826 essay 'The Sanity of True Genius', which argued that the common fallacy of seeing genius as 'allied to madness' arises because poetry produces 'a condition of exultation, to which [men] have no parallel in their own experience, besides the spurious resemblance of it in dreams and fevers'.⁵³ However imaginative experience might resemble the basic operations of hallucination by enabling the perception of objects which are not present or existent, the distinction between genuine madness and its semblance would have been an especially clear and significant one for Lamb, as Adam Phillips points out, given his intensely personal experience of family psychosis.⁵⁴

Otherworldly Encounters

Hallucination is a heuristic – as we have seen with Brontë, much like the analogy of magic – for fiction’s power to conjure non-material realities. Putting aside the necessary qualifications, the positive potential of this analogy is to articulate a literary criticism of fictional experience. For Lamb as later for Lewes, the concept (but not diagnosis) of hallucination helps to distinguish between the ‘real’ as content and quality, as well as to characterise a distinctive type of genius. Much like Lewes’s view of Dickens, Lamb’s sane ‘True Genius’ is characterised by the power to represent mental creations with the distinctness or detail of external objects, conferring ‘to the wildest dreams [. . .] the sobrieties of every day occurrences’, where the hack would give an ostensibly realistic narrative of ‘Bath and Bond-street – a more bewildering dreaminess [. . .] [than] all the fairy grounds of Spenser’.⁵⁵ As the critic Taylor Stoehr has put it, ‘two kinds of verisimilitude can be seen lurking in the theoretic background: that which appeals to our *judgment* of the correspondence between a fiction and life, and that which appeals to our *impression* of the lifelikeness of a fiction [. . .] scarcely a matter of fidelity at all, but rather one of appearance or effect’.⁵⁶ The literary critical questions Lamb and Lewes raise through (as they themselves acknowledge) the tenuous and hazardous analogy of ‘the action of the imagination in hallucination’ concern this distinction between two types of realism, and moreover, how to assess a non-correspondent verisimilitude as an unorthodox literary power.⁵⁷

Play, too, provided a heuristic for theorising an alternative criteria of literary ‘genius’ founded on the felt reality of fictions. In one useful and less cautionary interpretation of Hartley’s play, the resituating of his example in the context of other paracosmic cases prompted a reassessment from his anonymous reviewer in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, who returned to the topic with a signed essay for the same periodical in 1866. Francis Jacox’s ‘About Ejuxria and Gombroon: Glimpses of Day-Dreamland’, which includes a speculative canon of ‘quasi-Ejuxria or Gombroon’ from fiction and biographies (not unlike the first chapter of this book), comes to an explicit conclusion about this form of play as ‘an apprenticeship in the author’s craft’.⁵⁸ In Jacox’s reconsidered view, the problem of Hartley ‘believing in his own tale’ is reconfigured into the author’s ‘passionate belief in the reality of his every character and incident’:

For genius, when it takes to writing fiction, will more or less vividly, ‘realise’ to itself the ideal beings it summons into existence. It is not free and happy in its creations, unless it in some sort believe in them [. . .] The practical

importance is obvious of a certain intensity of belief, on the author's part, in the reality of his creations. If void of such belief himself, he will hardly succeed in impressing a conviction of it on his readers. In proportion to the liveliness of his belief in his characters as real people [...] will greatly depend the degree of interest he can expect to excite in his readers.⁵⁹

Like for Lewes, there is something besides accurate representation, social critique, moralised narrative, or compositional aesthetics which Jacox identifies here as a capacity and goal of fiction (for him, particularly of novel fiction) through the practices of 'Day-Dreamland'. Examples of imaginary worlds enable him to evaluate literature by the 'certain intensity' of what we might again substitute 'experience' instead of 'belief' as a more helpful term; or vividness, concreteness, the 'force of reality'. One need not subscribe to his view about the processes of the authorial mind to recognise, for one, its inversion of hallucinatory logic into literary skill, 'the mind mistaking its own conceptions for real and present existences'; and for another, its according of literary value to the production of such existences.⁶⁰

Through such geniuses – or genii – we return to Vision Island, and to criticism today in its need to recuperate alternative models of literary value. Albeit advancing from significantly different premises, the nineteenth century's pseudo-hallucinatory criticism of fiction presages, and can help to inform, Lowe and Marland's recent work on rehabilitating 'seeing things' as a function of realist fiction which (according to Barthes) ought to have outgrown it. Reading the opening of *Bleak House*, for instance, Marland notes 'how fanatically, fantasmatically visual the passage is – it is, if nothing else, a "vigorous ocular demonstration" [...] caking an impasto as thick as the "crust upon crust of mud"'; or as he otherwise explains it, how the narrator 'mentally rolls [the description] around the tongue of the mind (underneath the eyes of the mind)'.⁶¹ The passage – and the reading – is not only visual but gustatory and somatic, emphasising the sensuous-imaginative function of description apart from its 'structural purpose' in producing a reality effect and 'to sound the theme that will be developed throughout the novel'.⁶² Similarly, examples of what Lowe examines and calls 'feminine fiction', a realism attentive to the texture and experience of the everyday, invite the reader to 'enter a realm of sensual and experiential pleasure, a "phantom", as [Charlotte] Brontë calls it, of real experience'.⁶³ The examples of *hypotyposis* foregrounded by these critics resist Barthes's suggestion that the richly ornamented worlds of realism abstract either into symbolic meaning or into a connotative 'category of "the real" (and not its contingent contents)'.⁶⁴ Within the period

itself, the capacity for conjuring literary realities (theorised by Lamb, de Vere, Jacox, and Lewes), or the mind's susceptibility to its own illusions (repudiated by other critics and psychologists), exemplify polar opposite views of fiction which both lack any kind of structuralist disenchantment. Rather, such potentials for vision captured the critical imagination with horror or with qualified approval, locating the spectral (but really vicarious) experience of 'seeing things' at the heart of imaginative literature.

What do Victorian novels offer by way of 'detachable set-piece[s]' – through the sensuous-imaginative experience of their fictional spaces and objects?⁶⁵ Equipped with the critical perspectives of hallucination and 'hypotyposis', we return from these digressions to the value and uses of the virtual, especially as they deviate from more usual literary functions. Marie-Laure Ryan points out the attractions inherent to what she calls the 'diluted narrative' (a term which James also uses to describe *Middlemarch*), particularly characteristic in nineteenth-century realist novels:

[T]he plot of diluted narrative competes for attention with nonnarrative elements such as extended description, metanarrative comments, digressions [...] the text of diluted narrativity invites [the reader] to linger on the scene, to step outside narrative time. The reader is less concerned with finding out how the story ends than visualising the setting, experiencing its atmosphere, and achieving intimacy with the minds of characters.⁶⁶

There are of course a host of other concerns which, as Leavis remarked, readers ought to 'demand of a novel' – through various forms of more 'critical' reading – than wallowing diffusively in the fictional world or narrowly following the story. Yet as Lowe too suggests, there is something more to be gained by reimagining Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* as a fairground ride or fly-through sequence, allowing the reader or critic a turn at the various domestic comforts on offer: 'You are invited imaginatively, phantom-sensuously, to join Tina in playing with the medicine bottle [...] in strolling in the garden [...] [with] sensuous participation; we can choose the easiness of chair, the peculiar flavour of tobacco, the very physical attitude of the vicar'.⁶⁷

These fantasmatic sideshows of narrative can distract, 'compet[ing] for attention' with the novel's purpose to communicate something significant or representative about the world; but as we have seen again and again, the experience of vicariously being 'in' or 'with' the virtual realities of fiction can have its own distinctive uses.⁶⁸ 'Think of what this implies!' Lewes concludes about his theory of Dickens. 'Think how little the mass of men are given to reflect on their impressions, and how their minds are for the

most part occupied with sensations rather than ideas, and you will see why Dickens held an undisputed sway'.⁶⁹ Bodenheimer and Stolte are right to point out this 'implication' as a patronising judgement on Dickens and his readers, followed and exacerbated by a return to the language of mechanism and artifice. But Lewes's terms of deprecation also articulate the particularity, even advantages, of the artificial:

Give a child a wooden horse, with hair for mane and tail, and wafer-spots for colouring, he will never be disturbed by the fact that this horse does not move its legs, but runs on wheels – the general suggestion suffices for his belief; and this wooden horse, which he can handle and draw, is believed in more than a pictured horse by a Wouvermanns or an Ansdell. It may be said of Dickens's human figures that they too are wooden, and run on wheels [. . .] Just as the wooden horse is brought within the range of the child's emotions, and dramatizing tendencies, when he can handle and draw it, so Dickens's figures are brought within the range of the reader's interests[.]⁷⁰

As this book argues, play is not an analogy for a naïve or immature way of reading, but an alternative approach to fiction alive to both its distinction from reality and the usefulness of that distinction. On the one hand, Lewes appears to use the toy horse as an analogy for Dickens's 'wooden' figures in the idiomatic, deprecating sense of 'Lacking grace, liveliness', 'Mentally dull', or 'Of inferior character'; and to use the playing child to show up an uncritical reader's lowered sufficiency for 'belief'.⁷¹ On the other hand, his comparison also implies some of the advantages of the vivid but unrealistic toy: that the horse 'runs on wheels' allows the child to 'handle and draw it' (an interactivity which Lewes repeatedly emphasises) in a way that a more realistically 'pictured horse', or in fact a real horse, cannot.

Woodenness and wheels, in this sense, signify not dullness and limitation but materiality and functionality. Analogously, Dickens's fictions mobilise 'the reader's interests' and their 'dramatizing tendencies' in ways an accurate but less tangible realism might not, thereby offering an experience of the real more easily handled (and more rewarding) in miniature. In the following reading of *Little Dorrit*, I explore the experience and functionality of fictions as objects through Dickens's own novel of hallucination. In this text, characters recurrently fail to understand their implication in the moralised or thematic patterns of the novel, because they are distracted by 'that most pleasant but pernicious practice' of 'castle-building'.⁷² They do not see disasters approaching in their life-stories because they are busy visualising the details of a mental construction, often about their future lives, whose imagined concreteness is already so

absorbing that it forecloses the possibility (or blinds them to the impossibility) of its material realisation. The symbolic culmination of this theme is in fact represented by a mental breakdown, where the elderly Mr Dorrit loses all consciousness of his material surroundings to the vision of an imagined environment.

Little Dorrit has therefore been read as Dickens's most Foucauldian text, in which the private retreats of subjectivity always belie and abet one's incarceration within larger formal structures. But as I have been arguing, being fooled or interpolated are not the only uses of fantasy, and as Lewes is right to point out in spite of his ambivalences, the abstract and schematic are not the right rubrics for assessing Dickens's fiction. Although the novel appears to replicate both modern and historical fears about the entrapments of subjective illusion, it is also a novel which is insistently and sensuously detailed, realising its and its characters' fictions with extensive specificity. Besides Mr Dorrit, other characters also take hope or refuge in imagined environments – particularly buildings and interiors – which accompany and help them to manage their experiences of actual circumstance. The emotional usefulness of such projections for Amy Dorrit and Young John Chivery, like the analogous experience of the novel itself, depend on their acknowledged status as concretely sensible but explicitly fictitious objects; real but not actual. Mr Dorrit might choose a toy over a Wouvermanns because he has become unable to tell which is more like a real horse; but others may do so because they know which kind of object affords more fantasmatic solidity, pleasure, and resources for survival.

LITTLE DORRIT

In the opening scene of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, the prisoner John Baptist Cavalletto projects the geography of southern Europe onto the floor of his cell. Drawn with his finger (and no ink), the invisible map is both expansive ('Spain over there, Algiers over *there*') and improbably precise, apparently capable even of representing the cell itself:

'How can I say? I always know what the hour is, and where I am [. . .] See here, my master! Civita Vecchia, Leghorn, Porto Fino, Genoa, Cornice, Off Nice (which is in there), Marseilles, you and me. The apartment of the jailer and his keys is where I put this thumb; and here at my wrist they keep the national razor in its case – the guillotine locked up.'⁷³

The play of scales in this opening, integrating the cramped locality of the cell within the wider world beyond, seems to offer a metaphor for the novel's structure of the novel. Cavalletto's top-down representation of his own imprisonment within a massive, abstract design strikingly presages what Philip Collins has determined as 'not merely a critical commonplace but the obvious main approach to the novel', most prominently advanced by Lionel Trilling, that *Little Dorrit* is 'marked not so much by its powers of particularization as by its powers of generalization and abstraction [. . .] under the dominion of a great articulated idea'.⁷⁴ The subject of the novel is 'borne in upon us by the informing symbol, or emblem, of the book, which is the prison' as it manifests literally (in the case of Cavalletto, the Dorrits, and later Arthur Clennam) and metaphorically through 'persons and classes being imprisoned by their notions of predestined fate or of religious duty, or by their occupations, their life-schemes, their ideas of themselves, their very habits of language'.⁷⁵ Edmund Wilson similarly argues that 'the fable is [. . .] of imprisoning states of mind as much as [. . .] of oppressive institutions'; as does Hillis Miller after him, that the prison has 'a religious or metaphysical meaning for Dickens as well as a psychological or social one [. . .] linking physical imprisonment and imprisoning states of the soul'.⁷⁶

The contention I want now to take up is not with this interpretation,⁷⁷ but with the systematic legibility it makes of the novel as a 'great articulated idea'. There seems little which the novel invites us (or at least, critics) to 'see' in its fictions than their thematic connection to each other and collective subordination to a grand design; little of what James and Ryan call diffuseness, or Barthes 'the irreducible residues of functional analysis'.⁷⁸ In its polemic against bureaucratic redundancy and red-tape, the

novel appears itself almost utilitarian about its components: John Holloway marvels that ‘in the end, there are no gaps left in [the novel’s] pattern: everything is related to everything else’, an economical tightness which Collins points out as an explicit authorial intention, expressed in Dickens’s letters to John Forster, to make the subplots of ‘Society, the Circumlocution Office, and Mr Gowan [...] three parts of the one idea and design’, and of ‘making the introduced story [of Miss Wade] fit into surroundings impossible of separation from the main story’.⁷⁹ In his manuscript plans, Dickens wrote and double-underlined the note ‘*Parallel Imprisonments*’, almost overdetermining the critical case.⁸⁰ The curious effect of this visible workmanship is that, much as the characters are physically or psychologically locked up, they also seem trapped in a rigid narrative scheme and lacking, as Trilling notes, the ‘autonomous life’ of the typical Dickensian fiction, appearing ‘to be the fruit of conscious intention rather than of free creation’.⁸¹ Cavalletto’s map, as an analogy of the novel, is the antithesis of George Orwell’s aphorism that Dickens is ‘all fragments, all details – rotten architecture, but wonderful gargoyles’; rather, the picture it suggests of *Little Dorrit* is that of a meticulous prison floorplan.⁸²

But Cavalletto’s map is also something else, not meticulous but excessive, unplanned but perhaps inevitable: a virtual object in the local scene of the cell. In a kind of metaleptic encounter between representational and represented space, Cavalletto discovers while drawing that ‘there’s no room for Naples [...] he had got to the wall by this time’ (*LD* 6). Itself taking up ‘room’, the abstract map exerts its own concreteness by bumping up against the (itself fictional) cell, and its creator’s resignation that ‘it’s all one; it’s in there!’ (6) only highlights the imperfect fit of a mental object into their specified physical space. If maps and blueprints encourage a top-down, structural view, Cavalletto’s map brings us jarringly back into a cramped locality, vicariously stubbing our finger. Moreover, with Cavalletto’s fellow prisoner Rigaud, who he repeatedly exhorts to ‘See here [...] See here, my master!’ the map’s presence on the floor also passes into an intersubjective reality:

Cavalletto sat down on the pavement, holding one of his ankles in each hand, and smoking peacefully. There seemed to be some uncomfortable attraction of Monsieur Rigaud’s eyes to the immediate neighbourhood of that part of the pavement where the thumb had been in the plan. They were so drawn in that direction, that the Italian more than once followed them to and back from the pavement in some surprise. (9)

Cavalletto is comically surprised by the fact that, having emphatically made Rigaud look at his creation, the other prisoner continues to see – for his own reasons, attaching his own significance to – something which Cavalletto himself has stopped imagining. The narration too takes this perspective of someone for whom there is no longer anything to see, only ‘the immediate neighbourhood of that part of the pavement where the thumb had been in the plan’ (9); for Rigaud, however, the spot evidently continues to mark out the location of ‘the jailer and his keys’ (6). The trouble is again that the map is more present, more concrete, and more distracting than its original function requires, transforming from a design into a miniature, an object invested vicariously with Rigaud’s desire for freedom.

The characters of *Little Dorrit* are recurrently side-tracked by designs which turn into fictions, by abstract conjectures or plans which materialise in the present as fantasy. They prefer or tend to experience such imaginary objects as external and concrete – sometimes pathologically, sometimes not – in a different and more perverse engagement with fictions than the structural or the symbolic, and I suggest this to be an alternative perspective on the fictions of the novel itself. The opening chapter, for instance, calls to be interpreted as narrative foreshadowing for the series of literal and metaphorical prisons that follow in the novel (including, in the next chapter, the quarantine barracks); and as a schematisation of the prison or of ‘imprisoning states of the soul’. In Rigaud and Cavalletto’s cell, imprisonment is abstract and universal, applicable to anything and available anywhere:

The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light, the imprisoned damp, the imprisoned men, were all deteriorated by confinement. [...] Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb, the prison had no knowledge of the brightness outside, and would have kept its polluted atmosphere intact in one of the spice islands of the Indian ocean. (*LD* 2–5)

This is the mode of deterioration the novel would again reveal through Mrs Clennam in her sickroom, Amy and Mr Dorrit in the Marshalsea, Miss Wade in her mental self-torment, and so on, through different but interchangeable contexts ‘Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb’. Imprisonment in this collective sense is a social or spiritual state, to be subject to something like ‘the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form [...] a pure architectural and optical system [...] a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use’.⁸³ Just as Foucault sees the formal structure of Bentham’s Panopticon at work in hospitals, schools, and society at large, Dickens extrapolates

the degradations of the Marseille prison all over; as the Leavises puts it, 'The prison is the world of 'the mind-forg'd manacles' [...] it is Society with a big S'.⁸⁴

But like Rigaud with Cavalletto's map, we can be distracted from an intentional design by its details; by imagining these prisons individually through the material specificities which the novel's realism provides in excess of its abstract, signifying functions. The Marseille cell is not only filled with 'imprisoned air' and a 'polluted atmosphere' (*LD* 2), with the nebulous stuff of a carceral relation replicated universally, but with signs of life (however degraded): 'a draught-board rudely hacked upon [a bench] with a knife, a set of draughts, made of old buttons and soup bones, a set of dominoes, two mats, and two or three wine bottles' (2). Rigaud has been sleeping on 'a broad strong ledge of stone [...] three or four feet above the ground' under a grated window, and Cavalletto on the other side of the cell 'on the stone floor, covered with a coarse brown coat' (2). These are not exactly the domestic comforts Eliot invites us to imagine in the vicar's armchair and tobacco, but it is nonetheless a vivid insistence on the fictional lives of these characters as they have lived in this specific fictional place, with their needs for sustenance, entertainment, and places to lean and lie. In 'Seeing' his characters, George Gissing wrote, Dickens 'saw the house in which they lived, the table at which they ate, and all the little habits of their day-to-day life'.⁸⁵ If these 'little habits' tend not to matter in the narrative and social system which will unfold from this initial cell, for Cavalletto himself, they are worth vicariously and sensuously imagining:

Perhaps [Cavalletto] glanced at the Lyons sausage, and perhaps he glanced at the veal in savoury jelly, but they were not there long, to make his mouth water; Monsieur Rigaud soon dispatched them [...] and proceeded to suck his fingers as clean as he could, and to wipe them on his vine leaves. Then, as he paused in his drink to contemplate his fellow-prisoner, his moustache went up, and his nose came down.

'How do you find the bread?'

'A little dry, but I have my old sauce here', returned John Baptist, holding up his knife.

'How sauce?'

'I can cut my bread so – like a melon. Or so – like an omelette. Or so – like a fried fish. Or so – like Lyons sausage', said John Baptist, demonstrating the various cuts on the bread he held, and soberly chewing what he had in his mouth. (8)

These fantasmatic pleasures are poor substitutes for Rigaud's meal, just as the invisible miniature of a jailer's key stands in poorly for the actual key,

but they matter for extending the severely limited scope of these characters' experiences. Life, Cavalletto suggests, requires imaginative complement or sustenance, a sauce to go with the 'daily bread' allotted by the larger systems which govern material existence.⁸⁶ Moreover, Cavalletto's feast and map are doubles for the novel's own practice of creating imaginary things – for the reader's encounter with its 'sausage of Lyons, veal in savoury jelly, white bread, strachino choose, and good wine' (6) – which affords not only sober chewing but vicarious responses of perception and appetite.

At stake in recognising the 'autonomous life' of fictional spaces, lives, and objects, as they assert themselves through unnecessarily sensuous details, is what the novel has to offer in addition to a representation or scrutiny of life: a reparative extension thereof. If the 'conscious intention' of Dickens's novel is continually to reveal the barrenness of its world as a system of oppressive relations, in the *richness* with which it represents this world, the experience of the novel itself is anything but barren. Criticism of the Victorian novel requires more emphatic attention to this kind of conflict between the interpretation of the novel as literature and its experience as fiction, because the latter affords a practical, alternative use of the form as a tool of imaginative living. What the opening chapter of the Marseille prison represents thematically, as the first of many prisons in the narrative, or representationally as a reflection of society, is complicated by its specificity and concreteness as a fictional space containing fictional objects. Visualising this space, tasting its food, or feeling the hardness of its mats might be all 'beside the point', pulling us temporarily 'outside narrative time' and logic, but the novel also draws attention to such distractions through suggestive examples of its characters' own imaginative practices.⁸⁷ As we will see in the similar but more extensive case of Mr Dorrit, Dickens can be ambivalent about the value of such practices, but also recognises it as an alternative capacity of the novel – to enrich the real through the fantasmatic – from its systematic prosecution of a social critique.

Mr Dorrit and the Castle in the Air

The pair of consecutive chapters which narrate the final days of *Little Dorrit's* tragic father figure, William Dorrit, are titled after an intangible, spatial metaphor which, as Barbara Hardy has argued, forms 'a local structure for his death-scene'.⁸⁸ In 'A Castle in the Air' and 'The Storming of the Castle in the Air', freed from decades of imprisonment

in debtors' prison with a newfound wealth and position, Mr Dorrit travels from London to Rome absorbed in this figurative activity:

On again by the heavy French roads for Paris [...] Mr Dorrit, in his snug corner, fell to castle-building as he rode along. It was evident that he had a very large castle in hand. All day long he was running towers up, taking towers down, adding a wing here, putting on a battlement there, looking to the walls, strengthening the defences, giving ornamental touches to the interior, making in all respects a superb castle of it [...]

Building away with all his might, but reserving the plans of his castle exclusively for his own eye, Mr Dorrit posted away for Marseilles. Building on, building on, busily, busily, from morning to night. Falling asleep, and leaving great blocks of building materials dangling in the air; waking again, to resume work and get them into their places. (LD 614, 616)

Building a castle in the air – alongside variants like *in the clouds*, *in the sky*, *in Spain*, or its simple contraction into *castle-building* – has been idiomatic since the sixteenth century for the act of imagining a 'visionary project or scheme, day-dream, idle fancy'.⁸⁹ The extended use of the expression in 'A Castle in the Air' certainly conforms to this meaning in its suggestion that Mr Dorrit is preoccupied with planning the social transformation and future of his family, and more specifically, with a proposal to the snobbish Mrs General: during his stopover in Paris, Mr Dorrit interrupts his journey to purchase two pieces of jewellery – a 'love-gift' and a 'nuptial offering' – which 'plainly got up his castle now to a loftier altitude than the two square towers of Notre Dame' (616).

In a novel with multiple plots involving disastrous speculations, the expression's connotations of unrealistic fantasy bodes ill for this projected marriage plot. As a *narrative* 'structure', the castle embodies the narrative expectations precariously set up by Mr Dorrit himself, unendorsed by the narrator, in what Ryan would describe as a deviation of the 'text actual world' – the real plot as it will unfold – from its versions in the 'dreams, fictions, and fantasies conceived or told by characters [...] plans, passive projections, desires, beliefs'.⁹⁰ Hardy argues such projections and deviations to be characteristic of the novel as a whole:

Dickens concentrates on acts of forecast and fantasy, both conscious and unconscious, as micro-narratives in a subtle cellular structure composed on inner anticipations and retrospects [...] Like all good novelists he does two things at the same time: he prefigures future action in what Henry James in the Preface to *The Tragic Muse* called the art of preparations, and he also imagines individual imaginations as his characters look ahead realistically or fancifully [...] [with] subtle and unpredictable continuities and discontinuities.⁹¹

But this emphasis on imaginative lives as part of the ‘cellular structure’ of a narrative design, another means by which characters are ‘imprisoned by their notions of predestined fate [...] their life-schemes, their ideas of themselves’, overlooks another sense in which Mr Dorrit becomes imprisoned by his castle as it transforms into a literal vision of the past.⁹² As well as explicitly representing Mr Dorrit’s expectations and implicitly preparing him for a fall – so, in fact, doing three things at once – ‘The Storming of the Castle in the Air’ also evokes the expression’s new, nineteenth-century associations with a ‘most pleasant but pernicious practice’, a precursor to hallucination.⁹³

As an *architectural* ‘structure’, the danger of Mr Dorrit’s fantasy is ultimately not the unrealism of forecast but of mental misperception and breakdown. Like Cavalletto’s map, the plans abstractly represented by the aerial castle begin to assert a material presence in the fictional space of the scene, to more serious consequences than Rigaud’s ‘uncomfortable attention’ to an invisible map. On the way to a high society dinner at a Roman villa, Mr Dorrit is found ‘at his building work again’; midway through the meal, this work unexpectedly culminates in a persistent image of the Marshalsea debtors’ prison which overtakes his awareness of the (fictionally) real surroundings. Mentally transforming dinner guests into fellow prisoners and ‘The broad stairs of his Roman palace’ into ‘the narrow stairs of his London prison’, this eventually fatal episode echoes contemporary cautionary narratives about ‘seeing things’ through the imagination. Just as Prichard warned in 1822, over-dwelling on mental images has ‘carr[ie]d him away from the influence of his external perceptions, and [...] environed him with visions of unreal scenes’.⁹⁴ Mr Dorrit is imprisoned within his own delusional creation until his death, when the device of the castle and the prison are conflated and dispensed with in symbolic and grammatical parallel: as the inescapable past and the unrealisable future disappear together with his passing, ‘Quietly, quietly, all the lines of the plan of the great Castle melted one after another [...] Quietly, quietly, the reflected marks of the prison bars and of the zig-zag iron on the wall-top, faded away’ (*LD* 631). The wrapping-up of this episode, mirroring and reversing its initial construct of Mr Dorrit ‘Building on, building on, busily, busily’ (616), morphs the cultural idiom and local motif of the castle into the novel’s central image of the prison, integrating the lines and zig-zags of ‘a local structure’ back into the greater, overarching plotline.⁹⁵

But it is necessary to untidy this virtuosic handling of a motif, in its multiple meanings of unrealistic forecast, narrative foreshadowing, and psychological symptom – *because at no point does Mr Dorrit ever literally*

picture a castle. The neatness of the disappearing ‘lines’ disguises a snag in the symbolic ‘plan’ of these chapters: Mr Dorrit’s vision of the Marshalsea, even as it is absent in a British expatriate’s dining room in Rome, is not the same as – not even unreal in the same way as – his castle in the air, a figure of speech for his idealism. Mr Dorrit’s plans for the future, as they are implied through narrative clues, do not appear to involve construction of any kind. That the narrative builds up an extensive catalogue of ‘towers’, ‘wing’, ‘battlement’, ‘walls’, ‘defences’, and ‘ornamental touches’ (614), expanding, materialising, and visualising the figurative castle in the air, in fact diverts attention away from the character’s actual thoughts while metaphorising his mental processes; besides a nominal comparison between the two gifts and ‘the two square towers of Notre Dame’ (616), it hardly seems likely that each architectural component specified has some direct correspondent in Mr Dorrit’s scheme for social climbing. Yet the language insists on appealing to the proprioceptive and kinaesthetic – senses of space, direction, and weight – encouraging an experience of the castle not as a moralising idiom but as imagined object and area, running ‘up’ and ‘down’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, consisting of an ‘interior’, and even ‘dangling in the air’ (616). This overdetermined detailing of the aerial castle as a thing in itself, especially as it foreshadows the misperception in the following chapter, obscures the fact that it is constructed not in the diegetic reality (including within diegetic minds) but alongside it, within the mind of the reader.

When we think of the castle in the air as an imagined space like the hallucinated prison, as the novel’s prose prompts us to do, we become implicated in our own episode of ‘seeing things’ which Mr Dorrit does not in fact share (he is busy considering remarriage), but which offers a sympathetic perspective on his later breakdown (narrated largely from the outside). Readerly fantasy can itself be discontinuous with the narrative proper, distracted or misled not only by the dreams of characters but by our own excessively sensuous imagination, our own creative energy blurring the distinctions between realities even of abstract figures of speech. As Stoehr argues, Dickens’s figurative language derives a ‘dream-like, hallucinatory, super-real’ quality when it crosses metaleptically from the world of the novel into the different fictional world of the extended metaphor:

The completeness and inner consistency of the metaphor, as it is extended and expanded to constitute a world in itself, seem to lift the figure out of the realm of metaphor altogether. We believe in the metaphor as though it were not a metaphor at all [...] figures have transcended metaphor to become dreamlike amalgams of object and feeling.⁹⁶

Stoehr's argument revolves around the 'storming' of another prison – the Bastille in *A Tale of Two Cities* – but his account of metaphors 'extended and expanded' into worlds is particularly apt for describing *Little Dorrit's* transformation of the castle in the air from colloquial figure into the kind of three-dimensional, perceivable space that Mr Dorrit experiences through madness.⁹⁷ Much as in the novel's opening chapter, Dickens brings the imaginative practices of his characters into analogy with the experience of the novel, for better or worse, by juxtaposing levels of imagined concreteness: the invisible map bumps into the fictional cell, the figurative castle morphs into the hallucinatory prison. Far from the 'powers of generalization and abstraction' Trilling perceives in the novel, Dickens recurrently demonstrates the ways in which the imagination (literary or non-literary) is drawn almost inevitably to making spaces and solids concrete.⁹⁸

The organisation of these chapters around a figure of speech – the castle in the air – suggests language's particular role in this tendency to make experiential 'sense' of meaning. While characters within the novel draw, sculpt, and daydream their fictional objects, the novel's own exemplary transformation of the abstract into the concrete is embodied through an expression which seems inherently given to this process. The expression most likely originated from a sermon by Augustine which, as Auerbach has argued, addressed 'the problem of figuration' to exhort 'a literal-historical reading' of Biblical narrative: 'believe that what has been read to you actually happened as read, or else the foundation of an actual event will be removed [from the moral lesson], and you will be trying to build castles in the air'.⁹⁹ In a sense, the expression's later life in nineteenth-century English is unchanged from this original usage in their shared implication that ideals collapse without a foundation in actuality.¹⁰⁰ In another sense, however, Augustine's sermon also 'emphatically rejected those who would interpret Holy Scripture in a purely allegorical way', advocating a reading of religious narratives as accounts of material events.¹⁰¹ This secondary meaning of the expression – an insistence to concretise language – introduces unintended ambiguities to its later and more narrow usage as a moralisation against imaginary objects, for instance, in Forbes Winslow's 1842 treatise *On the Preservation of the Health of Body and Mind*:

The habit of what in common parlance is termed 'building castles in the air', has a most pernicious influence upon the health of the mind [...] when the fancy is allowed 'to body forth the form of things unknown', without being under proper discipline, much evil will result. Individuals endowed

with an unhealthy expansion of the imagination, create a world within themselves, in which the mind revels until all consciousness of the reality that surround them is lost.¹⁰²

The passage is another formulaic diagnosis of psychological danger, complete with an allusion to Theseus and to the perniciousness of common habits, but Winslow's language also presages Stoehr and *Little Dorrit* in prompting us to suspect something literal about his reference to 'castles in the air', especially as it stands in relation to a spatial metaphor, 'an unhealthy expansion', and a description of hallucinatory space, 'a world within'. Much like in Dickens's novel, a proprioceptive sense of the castle attaches onto its figurative uses to denote acts of sensory unreality; as if, in memory of its philological origins, it inherently defies reduction into allegory.

While it is clear that most nineteenth-century usages of this phrase do not consciously refer to a fictional construction within imagined space, this slippage occurs remarkably often, especially when it is used (as it frequently was) to describe the real-but-not-actual experience of paracosmic play. 'All children who are forbidden by their rank, education, or clean pinafores, to make dirt-pies', writes a reviewer for *Fraser's Magazine*, 'indulge in the building of air-castles; but we never knew or heard of so persevering an architect as young Hartley'.¹⁰³ In speaking as if the difference were not only between mental and physical forms of play, but between the material substances involved – respectable children can avoid dirtying their clothes by using air instead of earth – does this review speak figuratively? Or do they take Hartley for literally imagining fictional structures (which he did), just as children literally make dirt-pies? The expression intrinsically blurs this distinction, compounded by the fact that (as we have seen on Vision Island) children do in fact delight to play at building: *The New Monthly Magazine's* article on Jameson compares her to 'Hartley Coleridge with his dreamland Ejuxria, [and] Thomas de Quincey with his dreamland Gombroon', noting how she similarly 'imagined new worlds, and peopled them with life, and crowded them with air-castles, and constructed for the denizens [. . .] carefully evolved adventures'.¹⁰⁴ Embedded within a list of *fictional* activities literally performed (the creation of worlds, characters, and adventures), the *figurative* castle is functionally an abstraction for imaginative habit, but also difficult not to 'see' as something a character might inhabit in Ejuxria or Gombroon.

In its combination of the abstract and the sensuous, of transparency and tangibility, the aerial castle is a paradigmatic object of 'hypotyposis'; the antithesis to Davis's 'house in the novel' for which 'there is no "there" for a

“there” to be’.¹⁰⁵ Its virtual presence in *Little Dorrit* – and not even in the world of *Little Dorrit* – exemplifies the power of language to conjure the reality of a ‘there’ as Dickens exercises it in an ambivalent reflection on fiction’s less abstracting functions; ambivalent because Mr Dorrit is the novel’s most prominent and deeply compromised analogy for such fantasmatic experiences. His sensuous over-investment in abstract plans, at the expense of his perception of the here-and-now, is mimetically doubled by the readerly temptation to build worlds out of an extended figure of speech; both we and Mr Dorrit become too distracted by particularities, too fixated on materialising details, to observe the ‘text actual world’ which surrounds him:

Not a fortified town that they passed in all their journey was as strong, *not a Cathedral summit* was as high, as Mr Dorrit’s castle. *Neither the Saone nor the Rhone* sped with the swiftness of that peerless building; *nor was the Mediterranean* deeper than its foundations; *nor were the distant landscapes* on the Cornice road, *nor the hills and bay* of Genoa the Superb, more beautiful. (LD 616, emphasis added)

The mechanics of descriptive attention in these two chapters, by capitalising on the attraction of imagining details both in the novel and in the mind of its character, model Platonic or psychological anxieties about misperceiving imaginary objects for real ones. Those habits which for Cavalletto provide the ‘sauce’ to life, adding an imagined dimension to material experience, becomes a mutually excluding relation wherein the real and unreal compete to be perceived: for every proliferating tower or ornament of the figurative castle, ‘Not a fortified town [...] not a Cathedral summit [...] Neither the Saone nor the Rhone’ (for the reader, of course, the passage oscillates between the imagined world of the idiom and the imagined world of the narrative). The tendency of abstract plans or language to assume a concrete presence no longer collides with a stone wall which reasserts the greater solidity of the diegetic world, but blots it out as hallucination.

The case of Mr Dorrit comes to represent the novel’s paranoid position about projections (predictive and sensory), wherein the imagination’s richness is revealed to be a mode of impoverishment, and its capacity for escapism as an imprisoning state of mind. The novel’s titular heroine, Amy Dorrit, similarly experiences visions and misgivings which negate experiences of the world around her: while travelling through Italy, passing through deliberately unspecified environments of ‘splendid rooms’, ‘heaps of wonders’, ‘great churches’, and ‘miles of palaces’ (453), Amy finds that

'all she saw appeared unreal; the more surprising the scenes, the more they resembled the unreality of her own inner life' (451). Like her father's, her imagination is also dominated by visions which become inverse-proportionally real to her: 'the old room, and the old inmates, and the old visitors: all lasting realities that had never changed' (454). In another exemplification of hallucinatory logic, inner and outer worlds grow to resemble each other, and threaten to exchange places.¹⁰⁶

Yet Mr Dorrit is not the novel's representative nor final case for the potential effects of investment in imaginary objects; he is not even the last to build mental pictures of the Marshalsea. His narrative moralises the dangers of realising the imagined with too much detail and force, of mistaking the inner world for the outer, but Dickens nonetheless maintains the value of experiencing fiction, for one, as explicitly fictional; and for another, in more than a 'vague schematic way'.¹⁰⁷ In Amy's own carriage-dreaming, and in Young John Chivery's plan to domesticate the debtors' prison, the novel returns from its case of hallucination back to more complementary relations between imagined and material life. Like Mr Dorrit, both Amy and John are in some way mistaken or disappointed in their fantasies of the present or future; but rather than diminishing their perceptions, the practice of imagining rooms and objects helps them to express constructive responses to circumstance. Through the castle in the air, the novel demonstrates the autonomous force of fictional realities with 'all the salient details obtruding themselves on [. . .] attention', embodied to its logical extreme by the tragedy of Mr Dorrit.¹⁰⁸ Through these other examples of characters sensuously imagining alternate worlds or lives, Dickens draws a more subtle distinction between artificial experience and delusional belief, pulling back (as Lewes would do) from an example of madness to an account of fiction's capacity to produce unrealistic, but useful images.

Playing Prison-House

Amy, appearing to suffer from an early stage of her father's condition, cannot help but look at Venice 'as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison again' (*LD* 454).¹⁰⁹ But in addition to the Marshalsea, which continually intrudes into her awareness as hiding underwater or behind mountains, she also envisions – and chooses to envision – other, more consoling fantasies of rooms where she and Arthur Clennam had shared warm encounters. She describes them to Clennam as

idle and inexplicable visions, but her motives for seeing these specific places clearly derive from their affectionate association with him:

I often felt [. . .] as if Mrs Clennam's room where I have worked so many days, and where I first saw you, must be just beyond that snow. Do you remember one night when I came with Maggy to your lodging in Covent Garden? That room I have often and often fancied I have seen before me, travelling along for miles by the side of our carriage, when I have looked out of the carriage-window after dark. (456)

The appearance of these rooms, suspended over the changing landscapes of the moving carriage, echo the aerial castle and forebode the hallucinatory prison. Investing her longings in these rooms, she not only reflects on their memories but fancies to 'see' them, rebuilding them in the dark and snow which recalls the dimness of the Clennam House and the cold night of her visit to Covent Garden. Unlike for her father, however, her sensuous engagement with such visions does not involve belief; they are neither plans for the future nor delusions about the present. Rather, in their explicit unreality, they are a way of confronting the reality of her desire for Clennam. His presence is brought impossibly out of time and space, affording an experience she knows to be wildly untrue, like the 'detachable set-piece' of Barthes's rhetoricians, for whose purposes of fantasmatic experiencing there need be 'no hesitation to put lions or olive trees in a northern country'.¹¹⁰

If the seeming omnipresence of the prison suggests the replication of its conditions everywhere in a 'world of "the mind-forg'd manacles"', by the same token, Amy's portable vision allows her to take consolation anywhere.¹¹¹ The thing that floats outside her window is not an accurate nor inaccurate projection, realistic nor unrealistic plan, nor (despite the distinctness of its vision) a hallucination that occludes her awareness of actual surroundings; it is a mental miniature or toy, a semblance which makes the original more accessible by remaking it as artifice. It is this kind of object, too, which novels can provide through the vicarious experience of their material details. If *Little Dorrit* is a novel constructed 'under the dominion of a great articulated idea', or composed within 'a subtle cellular structure', it is also one which offers relief, through the richness and vividness of the reading experience, from one's continual implication in the truths of material reality.¹¹² The clarity with which Amy sees and dwells on her floating rooms does not derive its value from a '*judgment* of the correspondence between a fiction and life', but from its combination of 'lifelikeness' and non-correspondence; a palpable vision which does not solicit belief.¹¹³

The difference between these models of sensuous projection, between the virtual or fictional and the hallucinatory or Platonic, is embodied finally in the case of Young John Chivery. John, whose unrequited love for Amy forms another recurring motif in the novel, contemplates his plans for marriage through his own castle in the air. Like Mr Dorrit, his obsession with idealising this future produces an image of 'the prison again' (*LD* 454); unlike Mr Dorrit, however, he is literally imagining the 'ornamental touches' (614) he wishes to put onto the prison as an architectural space, in a true conflation of narrative figure and character fantasy:

Young John had considered the object of his attachment in all its lights and shades. Following it out to its blissful results [...] Say things prospered, and they were united. [...] Say he became a resident turnkey. She would officially succeed to the chamber she had rented for so long. There was a beautiful propriety in that. It looked over the wall, if you stood on tip-toe; and, with a trellis-work of scarlet beans and a canary or so, would become a very Arbour. There was a charming idea in that [...] with the Arbour above, and the Lodge below; they would glide down the stream of time, in pastoral domestic happiness. Young John drew tears from his eyes by finishing the picture with a tombstone in the adjoining churchyard, close against the prison wall, bearing the follow touching inscription: 'Sacred to the Memory Of JOHN CHIVERY, Sixty years Turnkey, and fifty years Head Turnkey [...] Also of his truly beloved and truly loving wife, AMY, whose maiden name was DORRIT, Who survived his loss not quite forty-eight hours[.]' (206)

The passage requires quotation at length because it really does describe a multi-dimensional fantasy 'in all its lights and shades', combining time and space, text and vision, putting 'the Arbour above, and the Lodge below' while travelling 'down the stream of time' towards a 'finishing [...] picture' of their epitaphs. In the sense that John can already mentally occupy this space – drawing tears from his eyes, satisfaction from its 'charming idea' – his vision is both fantasy and forecast, valued as much for its predictive or preparatory nature as for the arrangement and construction already performed. It is both a plan or road-map for the future and a concrete, sensuous world which he has realised to himself in the present, and to the reader as a reality produced through description. Neither need wait for the actual 'blissful results' to 'see' them already assuming a detailed existence as a fictional object in the fictional world of the novel.

In another pointed example of the novel's many disappointed expectations – the personal and fluctuating prolepses which Hardy notes as a

means of characterisation and narrative structure – John’s hopes are quickly dashed by actuality. Yet, because of its vividness as a fiction, the *world* of his hopes survives this collapse of its misguided conjectural value. After Amy’s rejection of his advances, John continues to imagine his future Marshalsea, not as a delusion in the face of harsh reality, but as an extended space for experiencing its harshness. Although it is unclear what happens (for instance) to the canary or the trellis of beans, immediately following his rebuff, the text on the tombstone is revised: John composes ‘the following new inscription [. . .] “Here lie the mortal remains OF JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth mentioning, Who died about the end of the year [1826], Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the word AMY might be inscribed over his ashes, which was accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents”’ (*LD* 213). As John does not in fact die within the year, this turns out to be no more accurate as a forecast than the first, touching picture – but to evaluate it by those terms is of course to misread the point of the new inscription as an immaterial monument to his disappointment. Much as his vision of domestic happiness was already satisfying in itself, his composition of a fictional tombstone suggests the vicarious emotional value of visualising his grief through a projection in imagined space, as one of Dickens’s ‘dreamlike amalgams of object and feeling’.¹¹⁴ Like Amy herself, John holds on to visions which he knows to be unreal and untrue, but whose experience of detail nonetheless provides a real outlet for working through the painful exigencies of the real.

The fantasy world of Young John Chivery is the most explicit in the novel of what characters can *do* with fantasy objects. John is a decidedly minor character, relegated to his small corner of the novel’s geographically and socially expansive narrative, whose choices (when he has any) rarely make real differences to the world in which he finds himself. Yet unlike more central characters like Mr Dorrit, who ultimately can do little with the real resources they have, John makes strategic use of his imaginary objects. His inner world, which begins as a plan of action to then become indulgently realised into fantasy, finally bears a different relation to life and action when it reappears, near the end of the novel, as he nobly aids Amy and Clennam to realise their love for each other. John falls asleep ‘after composing and arranging the following monumental inscription on his pillow’:

Stranger! Respect the tomb of John Chivery, Junior, who died at an advanced age not necessary to mention. He encountered his rival, in a distressed state, and felt inclined to have a round with him; But, for the sake of the loved one, conquered those feelings of bitterness, and became magnanimous. (*LD* 714)

What John demonstrates is not the ability to turn his plans into reality, or to forecast the direction of events – in one way or another, almost all of the characters fail to do so – but the ability to transform foiled expectations into a counterfactual (technically, counterfactual) reality, a miniature of the novel's world over which he asserts a kind of authorial autonomy alongside (and perhaps sometimes against) Dickens's narration.¹¹⁵ The triumph of John Chivery, in the grand scheme of *Little Dorrit's* globetrotting ambitions, consists of this reparative accommodation – between the intractable logic of the world around him and, within that, a little corner of life as he chooses to envision it to himself.

This, too, is the triumph of the novel's little world and its function as a medium for artificial experience. As I have argued, Brontë's fiction provides a version of the world in which it is possible to perform powerful, vicarious actions that acknowledge and defy material constraints; Trollope offers flexible realities whose facts and causations are open and responsive to human creativity, and which cultivate this as a generalisable moral perspective; Thackeray creates a holding-space, in the 'Fable-land' of the novel's world, into which readers can extend their social life as imaginary regions that ostensibly never end. In this final case study, I have attempted to show how nineteenth-century theorisations of fiction as analogous to hallucination presage this sense of its practical, but not necessarily 'realistic', experience. These palpable worlds are not solipsistic retreats nor psychological prisons, not symbolic nor historical representations, but fictions whose presence and experience afford an imaginative extension of life and its manifold resources for living.