

Review: Tyson Stolte, *Dickens and Victorian Psychology: Introspection, First-Person Narration and the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) 288pp. ISBN 978-0-19-285842-9, £70.00.

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IN *DICKENS AND Victorian Psychology*, Tyson Stolte attempts to rectify the suggestion first proposed by George Henry Lewes in 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism' (1872), and later cemented by Henry James and Walter Bagehot, that, as a writer, Dickens was 'no thinker'.¹ Lewes's essay contrasts Dickens 'the man', who frequently discussed psychological matters and included psychology-related essays in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, with Dickens 'the author', whose novels were, according to Lewes, populated with 'unreal', shallow caricatures.² However, as Stolte reminds us in his introduction, not all nineteenth-century critics shared this view. For Edwin P. Whipple and John Forster, Dickens's characters' apparent shallowness belies a depth; they were, as Whipple put it, 'grotesque in form [...] [but] true and natural in heart'.³ Building on this juxtaposition, Stolte argues that Dickens's novels reveal his position as a Christian dualist, reaffirming his belief in a separation of body and mind, and stressing the latter's unknowability, except through introspection. This, according to Stolte, derived from the author's 'personal belief, a Christianity founded primarily on the New Testament [...] emphasizing the importance of the work each individual is called to do'.⁴ For Stolte, this represented Dickens's deliberate counter-response to nineteenth-century developments in psychology, which saw the field move from its religious origins as 'the study of the soul' to become more closely aligned with science and materialism.⁵

¹ Tyson Stolte, *Dickens and Victorian Psychology: Introspection, First-Person Narration, and the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 3.

² George Henry Lewes, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 11.62 (1872), 141–54 (p. 146).

³ Edwin P. Whipple, 'Novels and Novelists: Charles Dickens', *North American Review*, 69 (1849), 383–407, in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* ed. by Philip Collins (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), pp. 238–241 (p. 239), cited in Stolte, p. 6.

⁴ Stolte, p. 33.

⁵ Stolte, p. 24.

This exploration of Dickens's affirmation of dualism in the face of developments in psychology marks the volume's original contribution to scholarship. As Stolte makes clear, 'no critic has thoroughly examined Dickens's response to the religious stakes of [...] mental philosophy'.⁶ Certainly, the combination of religion and science proves particularly fruitful for stressing psychology's religious ancestry and prevents Stolte from anachronistically discussing psychology via its modern status as a scientific, and not theological, endeavour. Throughout his introduction, Stolte carefully avoids simplistic readings regarding the rise of science and loss of religion, noting that 'the history of psychology cannot be adequately explained as the triumph of secularisation'.⁷ Stolte argues that Christian dualists such as Dickens felt that their beliefs were threatened by the encroachment of developments such as physiognomy and phrenology and, to use Stolte's phrase, the growing 'spectre of materialism'.⁸ For Stolte, Dickens responded to this threat through an increasing reliance on introspection as a narrative technique, claiming a discursive space in which the mind's unknowability could be explored and problematised.

We can position Stolte's text within the burgeoning field of medical humanities and, more specifically, current scholarship on Dickens and nineteenth-century science. Like Stolte, Adelene Buckland has countered Lewes's essay in 'Charles Dickens, Man of Science' (2021) by suggesting that Dickens played a major role in Victorian scientific culture.⁹ Andrew Mangham has also contextualised the character of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1861) through the lens of contemporary attitudes to menopause.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Greta Perletti, David McAllister, and Jill Matus have all written on Dickens and memory, mortality, and trauma respectively.¹¹ *Dickens and Victorian Psychology*,

⁶ Stolte, p. 40.

⁷ Stolte, p. 29.

⁸ Stolte, p. 24.

⁹ See: Adelene Buckland, 'Charles Dickens, Man of Science', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.3 (2021), 423–55.

¹⁰ See: Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹¹ Stolte, p. 40. See also: Greta Perletti, 'Dickens, Victorian Mental Sciences and Mnemonic Errancy', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 10 (2010); David McAllister, "'Subject to the Spectre of Imagination": Sleep, Dreams, and Unconsciousness in *Oliver Twist*', *Dickens Studies Annual*,

however, expands on these 'local interventions' by focusing on narrative technique as a core element of its methodology.¹² In using this approach, Stolte notes his debt to Sally Shuttleworth's identification of the 'shared textual economy' of nineteenth-century novelists and psychologists.¹³ Stolte concludes his introduction with a justification of his work's chronological approach as a means of demonstrating how the various narrative techniques employed by Dickens evolved in response to contemporaneous developments in psychology.

Stolte's first chapter focuses on *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844). Through the earlier novel, Stolte explores Dickens's preoccupation with physiognomy and the science of reading the mind through the body, which appears inconsistent with Dickens's dualism and belief in the mind's unknowability. However, Stolte argues that Dickens only reflects contemporary psychological debates that position the mind as having a physical basis or 'anchor', rather than personally refuting dualism. For Stolte, Dickens's belief in dualism is re-affirmed through the depiction of Ralph Nickleby's suicide, which shows 'Dickens moving more definitively away from the outward depiction of consciousness and towards [...] an introspective perspective'.¹⁴ In the second half of the chapter, Stolte draws our attention to this movement through Dickens's exploration of Jonas Chuzzlewit's interiority. In both cases, the pay-off feels a little lacking: a more thorough contextualisation of Ralph and Jonas within Dickens's other works would have been beneficial for assessing their significance to Dickens's narrative development. The chapter concludes with a fascinating section on Dickens's comparisons between humans and animals in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. His frequent allusions to Jonas's 'beastliness', and explicit reference to 'the Monboddoo Doctrine', which claimed 'orangutans were members of the human species', in the novel's first chapter appear (like physiognomy and phrenology) inconsistent with Dickens's Christian dualism.¹⁵ Yet the chapter ends without sufficiently exploring these inconsistencies. Stolte's claim that these passing references to naturalism and early evolutionary theory

38 (2007), 1–17; Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹² Stolte, p. 40.

¹³ Stolte, p. 11.

¹⁴ Stolte, p. 41.

¹⁵ Stolte, p. 90.

'underscored what was at stake in Dickens's efforts to insist on the fundamental privacy of the mind', issues an open invitation to other scholars to further explicate Dickens's relationship with these burgeoning scientific fields.¹⁶

In chapter two, Stolte's attention moves to *David Copperfield* (1849). Contradicting Nicholas Dames and Michael S. Kearns, Stolte suggests that Dickens opposed strict associationism in the novel, while stressing that he did not completely dispute the model of associative thoughts. Taking a nuanced approach, Stolte reads *David Copperfield* alongside Scottish faculty psychology, which supported the association of ideas, but (unlike a strict adherence to associationism) showed the mental faculties to be '(at least to some degree) innate'.¹⁷ Stolte argues that the novel represents Dickens's theorising upon the association of ideas and the irrefutability of innate mental gifts, which in turn leads him to re-assess Uriah Heep as 'a nightmare vision of the associative self' existing in opposition to David's innate goodness (and Dickens's belief in such things).¹⁸ In mentioning the comparisons of Heep to various animals, Stolte misses an opportunity to link back to his previous chapter; however, the clear juxtaposition of David and Heep offers a refreshing take on two of Dickens's most famous characters.

Chapter three's discussion of *Bleak House* (1852) addresses Esther's first-person narration, which mirrors the narrative perspective of *David Copperfield*. Yet, unlike David, Esther 'desires to talk about anything other than herself'.¹⁹ Stolte argues that this reluctance to embrace introspection means that, as in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens leans heavily on physiognomy as a way of reading the mind through the body in these novels. Stolte emphasises that this should not necessarily be considered a step backward for Dickens, as the chapter explores a wide spectrum of physiognomic theories. Some of these were 'perfectly compatible with [...] dualism', while others, such as those proposed in Alexander Walker's *Physiognomy Founded on Physiology* (1834), 'laid bare the material foundations of consciousness'.²⁰ Stolte's engagement with the legal texts of

¹⁶ Stolte, p. 95.

¹⁷ Stolte, p. 102.

¹⁸ Stolte, p. 118.

¹⁹ Stolte, p. 127.

²⁰ Stolte, p. 147, 135.

Bleak House also proves fruitful. He draws interesting parallels between the law's fascination with the physicality of letters, wills, bills, etc., rather than their content, and contemporary psychology's apparent prioritising of the material body over the immaterial mind contained within it.

In the fourth chapter, Stolte revisits associationism, presenting it as an alternative to the 'anachronistic' psychoanalytical readings of *Great Expectations* famously proposed by Peter Brooks.²¹ More specifically, Stolte analyses Pip's narrative through nineteenth-century theories on latent thought, as proposed by William Hamilton's *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* (1859). Stolte's use of latent thought to explain *Great Expectations*' preoccupation with flashes of realisation, reflex actions, and 'the spirituality of latent mental modifications' is compelling.²² However, as with his earlier discussions on *Martin Chuzzlewit*, developments in the burgeoning field of evolutionary biology (Darwin's *Origin of the Species* appeared a year before Dickens's novel), complicate matters. As these attempts to square evolution with Christian dualism 'end in confusion', Stolte is prevented from drawing solid conclusions, which proves frustrating for author and reader alike.²³

Given the unfinished state of the novel, solid conclusions are made doubly challenging when Stolte turns his attention to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) in his final chapter. Rather than following the novel's murder plot, Stolte focuses on John Jasper's psychic state, which he explains through the nineteenth-century theory of 'double consciousness': 'a rigid split in a subject's knowledge and awareness'.²⁴ Beginning with Dickens's speech to the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1869, in which he 'scoffed at the suggestion that this was a material – and thus irreligious – age', Stolte centralises the author's unwavering commitment to the Christian dualist cause.²⁵ However, as with Dickens's use of physiognomy, phrenology, and evolution in his earlier works, the apparently materialistic splitting of Jasper's mind puts pressure on such a strongly held theological position. Stolte identifies various tactics used by Dickens to

²¹ Stolte, p. 168.

²² Stolte, p. 177, emphasis in the original.

²³ Stolte, p. 206.

²⁴ Stolte, p. 211.

²⁵ Stolte, p. 208.

nullify the threat posed by double consciousness: his domesticating of it, for example, and the suggestion that Jasper's divided self parallels the Christian 'division between this life and the next'.²⁶ The identification of these various tactics opens up space for more focused individual studies, especially on double consciousness, in the future.

Although not without critical precedent, *Dickens and Victorian Psychology* offers an important addition to the nineteenth-century medical humanities. Stolte's focus on Dickens's narrative technique enables him to broaden his scope beyond isolated references to mesmerism, physiology, and phrenology to explore Dickens's underlying understanding of the mind (informed by his theological positioning) and its impact on his authorial practice. Stolte carefully avoids the anachronism of reading present-day psychology into a nineteenth-century context, in which defining psychology remains a 'notoriously daunting task'.²⁷ The complexities of this task, most notably the interplay between, and shared discourses of, religion and science, prevent straightforward conclusions and Stolte should be applauded for resisting the urge to simplify his subject matter. There are, however, instances in which primary materials could benefit from a little extra critical space, particularly given Stolte's chosen methodology of literary analysis. There are also missed opportunities to draw comparisons between the novels – comparisons that would have drawn the reader's attention more closely to developments in Dickens's narrative technique.

However, these criticisms are outweighed by Stolte's serious attempt to wrestle with an extremely complex topic, which warrants further investigation. His methodology might, for example, be applied to other authors and literary forms, especially given the shared textual economies of nineteenth-century literature and psychology. For his part, Stolte is keen to steer his reader's attention towards discussions surrounding the theories of the soul, a subject 'that has been largely absent from literary critical studies of the period'.²⁸ Rather than dismissing the soul from the vantage of our own secular age, Stolte urges future critics in the field to revisit the topic with the sincerity with which those in the nineteenth century treated the subject.



²⁶ Stolte, p. 232.

²⁷ Stolte, p. 16.

²⁸ Stolte, p. 244.

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