“Dickens’s As If”:
Analogy and Victorian Virtual Reality

Jonathan Farina

If recurrent colloquialisms and everyday phrases inscribe the perspectives of a culture most habitually assumes, then conditional analogy and the subjunctive mood were perhaps the most characteristic Victorian perspectives. “As if” underwrote the way the Victorians knew. Charles Dickens’s prose contains an extraordinary number of “as ifs”: 411 in *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), 393 in *David Copperfield* (1849–50), 392 in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), 266 in the substantially shorter *Great Expectations* (1860–61), and so on. This is a common phrase and these are long books, but “as if” only appears five times each in Anthony Trollope’s *Doctor Thorne* (1858) and *Framley Parsonage* (1860), and only about a third as much (135 instances) in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–48).

This does not mean that an epistemology of “as if” did not also underwrite the styles of Trollope and Thackeray, because “as if” is just one pronounced articulation of conditional analogy and the subjunctive mood. Dickens used “as if” at a significantly higher statistical frequency than almost all other familiar writers, but other Victorian writers did use different forms of conditional similes more than pre- and post-Victorians. I isolate “as if” in this paper as a paradigm for a historically specific Victorian investment in the subjunctive mood because I can easily trace and count iterations of the phrase.

Abstract: This essay treats “as if” as a traceable signature of a historically specific Victorian form of knowing according to which writers represented their objects—from geological forces and the light refracted by motes of dust to feelings and unconscious motives—in the form of characters. Working with texts by Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Lyell, and John Tyndall, the essay describes how Victorians capitalized on the speculative potential and decorous self-abnegation articulated by “as if” and other conditional analogies and subjunctive phrases. In exemplary figures like David Copperfield and Esther Summerson and in the science of Lyell, “as if” signifies selfreflective depth of character, sympathetic imagination, and inductive reasoning, but Micawber, Skimpole, and Tyndall reveal the concomitant detachment and relativity that underwrote this figure of virtual reality.

In *Principles of Geology* (1830–33), Charles Lyell explicitly and stylistically legitimizes “analogy” as the methodological perspective of the new geology (1: 3). For example, in “Methods of Theorizing in geology” he
describes “analogy” “as affording the only source of authentic information” (3: 4). He distinguishes analogy as a credible, value-neutral form of induction preferable to the “ingenious conjectures” and “boundless field of speculation” practiced by catastrophist geologists (3: 3). Lyell writes:

The imagination is as much perplexed by such errors as to time, as it would be if we could annihilate space, and by some power, such as we read of in tales of enchantment, could transfer a person who had laid himself down to sleep in a snowy arctic wilderness, to a valley in a tropical region, where on awaking he would find himself surrounded by birds of brilliant plumage, and all the luxuriance of animal and vegetable forms of which nature is there so prodigal. . . . But if, instead of inverting the natural order of inquiry, we cautiously proceed in our investigations, from the known to the unknown, and begin by studying the most modern periods of the earth’s history, attempting afterwards to decipher the monuments of more ancient changes, we can never so far lose sight of analogy, as to suspect that we have arrived at a new system, governed by different physical laws. (1: 160)

Like much of the Principles, this passage relies on the subjunctive mood. “As it would be if we could annihilate [and] could transfer” posits a hypothetical analogy as an intellectual operation that derives truth even as it denies the hypothetical circumstances themselves as untrue. We can neither annihilate space nor transfer people but such virtual circumstances, Lyell simultaneously implies, nevertheless accurately depict the complexities of geological science precisely because they do not lose sight of analogy. Lyell follows his own advice: one short section at the tail end of the chapter on coral incorporates twelve pairings of “ifs” and “buts,” each of which draws conclusions about reef formation by speculating and then disavowing such speculation as mere speculation (2: 298–301).

Lyell covets visible evidence, but he nevertheless reiterates anxiously that the proper objects of geological knowledge are not visible. Analogy attenuates this awkwardness and mediates Lyell’s access to the unseen. To see the “analogous results of some former epoch,” he writes, we need to “recognise the analogy” with both “reason and the imagination” (1: 81). Most of these conditional analogies are dour hypotheses, paragraphs beginning with “if” followed by paragraphs beginning with adversative “buts.” But Lyell sometimes writes with Dickensian flair: he imagines “an amphibious being” to make submarine observations and “some ‘dusky melancholy sprite,’ like umbriel” (1: 82) to register subterranean “operations invisible to us,” to overcome “the limited range of our vision” (1: 83). “As if” imagines access to foreclosed perspectives. The combination of imaginative, sympathetic speculation and disavowal of speculation characterizes the epistemology of Victorian virtual reality when it depicts coral reefs as much
as when it depicts complex characters, ideologies, social institutions, and other material realities.

*Bleak House* (1852–53), which features 311 “as ifs,” begins with that implacable November weather: “As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephanteine lizard up Holborn Hill.” In uniformitarian fashion, this “as if” collapses past and present conditions. But Dickens works with conditional analogy throughout the whole novel. “Chance people on the bridges . . . with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon,” Dickens writes early in the novel (5). In another instance, Mrs. Pardiggle overturns a table “as if by invisible agency” (95). Then a long-dead Dedlock stares from a painting “as if he did not know what to make of it” (142). Later, the shutters stare at Mr. Weevle “in his sleep, as if they were full of wonder” (255), and Mr. Bagnet speaks “as if he were himself the bassoon of a human orchestra” (343). Mr. Kenge stands “with his back to the fire and casting his eyes over the dusty hearthrug as if it were Mrs. Jellyby’s biography,” in yet another instance of the phrase (35). Finally, Mrs. Jellyby has “handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if . . . they could see nothing nearer than Africa!” (37). These quotations all come from indulgent, comic descriptions that exemplify the “metonymic reciprocity” that J. Hillis Miller discerns between Dickens’s characters and their surroundings (128). Like Lyell’s conditional analogies, they animate or personify material reality with invisible, inaccessible agency.

Yet Dickens relies equally heavily on “as if” to articulate the moral and emotional complexity of his principal characters. Indeed, “as if” is the fundamental syntax of Dickensian characterization. After Guppy’s proposal, Esther feels “as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll” (*Bleak House* 115). She later says that Mr. Jarndyce, whom she loves “as if he had been [her] father” (436), “spoke in a regretful tone so new to [her], that [she] inwardly repeated [what he said], as if that would help [her] to his meaning” (212). Reading the proposal, she cries “as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost” (538). Just such an “as if” figured the pitch of John Stuart Mill’s “dejection”: “I felt,” Mill writes, “as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power” (101–02). The conditional
simile characterizes Victorian feeling as virtual experience irreducible to words.

Dickens comically foregrounds “as if” in characters like Mr. Micawber, who lives in his own virtual reality and “speaks as if the words were something real in his mouth, and delicious to taste” (David Copperfield 150). Furthermore, he has “a certain expression of face, as if his voice were behind his eyebrows” (451). in Martin Chuzzlewit (1843–44), Anthony remarks to pecksniff that “The annoying quality in you, is [that you] have a way with you, as if you—he, he, he!—as if you really believed yourself.” To this pecksniff manages to respond “as if he had received the highest compliments that language could convey” (123). in Bleak House, sir Leicester passes a “capital sentence; as if it were the next satisfactory thing to having the sentence executed” (148) and “yields up his family legs to the family disorder [gout], as if he held his name and fortune on that feudal tenure” (196); Tulkinghorn enjoys his wine, “As if it whispered to him of its fifty years of silence and seclusion [and] shuts him up the closer” (273); and Mr. kenge “gently mov[es] his right hand as if it were a silver trowel with which to spread the cement of his words on the structure of the system and consolidate it for a thousand ages” (741). Dickens’s “as ifs” are indeed the cement that allows characters to negotiate with abstract feelings, subjectivities, ideologies, and social systems as if they were concrete realities. They also instantiate “concrete virtuality,” or the requisite balance of particularity and generality that distinguishes modern character (Mckeon 108–09).

skimpole exemplifies this translation of subjective abstraction into lived reality: “i almost feel as if you ought to be grateful to me for giving you the opportunity of enjoying the luxury of generosity,” he says to thank Esther and richard for paying his debts (Bleak House 67).

Esther says of him,

All this and a great deal more he told us, not only with the utmost brilliancy and enjoyment, but with a certain vivacious candour— speaking of himself as if he were not at all his own affair, as if skimpole were a third person, as if he knew that skimpole had his singularities but still had his claims too, which were the general business of the community and must not be slighted. he was quite enchanting.

(66)

But skimpole’s problem is also Dickens’s: in his prose credible characters, incredible characters, and narrators all share the subjunctive mood that skimpole caricatures.
indeed, Esther refers to herself with similar enchantment: “it seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of my life!” (27). Like David Copperfield, Esther is both narrator and the subject of self-reflective narrative. And her use of “as if” moralizes, by disavowing, her self-reflection. Esther’s character, in all senses of the term, comprises her self-reflection, her inability to know herself completely, her self-deception, and her self-abnegation. Her character relies rhetorically on her recourse to “as if.” Thus, upon reading Jarndyce’s letter of proposal, which “addressed [her] as if [her and Jarndyce’s] places were reversed,” Esther cries, “not only in the fullness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect—for it was strange though i had expected the contents—but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me” (537–38). Esther subordinates the contents of the letter and the contents of her feeling to the formal morality of her syntax, the form of her feeling. Convalescing, Esther recognizes the complexity of her character by its doubling: she claims to have “felt a little beside myself, though knowing where i was; and i felt confused at times—with a curious sense of fullness, as if i were becoming too large altogether” (390).

“As if” articulates the perspective many of Dickens’s protagonists assume on themselves, the figure of self-reflexivity. Before acknowledging his desire for Agnes, Copperfield recalls

cherishing a general fancy as if Agnes were one of the elements of my natural home. As if, in the retirement of the house made almost sacred to me by her presences, Dora and i must be happier than anywhere. As if, in love, joy, sorrow, hope, or disappointment; in all emotions; my heart turned naturally there, and found its refuge and best friend. (414)

And while the content of David’s “undisciplined heart”—like Esther’s “something for which there is no name”—remains unwritten, the rhetorical form of his turn to that heart is “as if.” here “as if” stands in for the acts of self-effacement and self-reflection that the text values as the signs of character, the signatures of novelistic knowledge, more than any consistent, nameable feelings or attributes of character.

Like Lyell, Dickens’s characters make skeptical claims to knowledge, but their knowledge nevertheless qualifies as knowledge precisely because of the skepticism formally inscribed in it. This epistemology of the conditional simile also emerges in the early modern period. Citing Touchstone’s remark in William shakespeare’s As You Like It that there is “much virtue in if,” steven shapin explains in A
a characteristic mark of the English natural-philosophical enterprise was its vigilant protection of the factual domain combined with injunctions to speak modestly, diffidently, and doubtingly about the domain of the theoretical. (125)

“it was philosophically and morally possible to do so,” shapin continues, “because the foundations of knowledge and of members’ moral order were located elsewhere”—in the concomitant epistemic and moral credibility of gentlemen, whose character was conventionally founded on truthfulness (125). And so, in Our Mutual Friend, “the meek man” confronts Mr. podsnap with the realities of poverty and hunger:

The meek man was afraid we must take it as proved, because there were the inquests and the registrar’s returns. . . . The man of meek demeanor intimated that truly it would seem from the facts, as if starvation had been forced upon the culprits in question—as if, in their wretched manner, they had made their weak protests against it—as if they would have taken the liberty of staving it off if they could—as if they would rather not have been starved upon the whole, if perfectly agreeable to all parties. . . . The meek man was quite willing to concede that, but perhaps it rendered the matter even worse, as showing that there must be something appallingly wrong somewhere. (143–44)

The meek man parodies what shapin describes as “epistemological decorum,” but this decorum characterizes Dickens’s protagonists and narrators (193–242).

“As if” underwrites the way Victorians could know, and this epistemology suggests they could only know reality to the degree that they could know each other. recurrent “as if’s” present the narrative in which they occur as a conjectural history of some real story that purportedly precedes, exceeds, or otherwise eludes its narrator’s perspective. But the conditionality of the analogy reduces this to a virtually real subtext. so Mr. Jellyby sits “with his head against the wall, as if he were subject to low spirits . . . as if he had something on his mind,” all as if Mr. Jellyby actually had a real mind and Dickens could not suss out what was on it (Bleak House 41). Likewise, Mr. george “pass[es] one of his heavy hands over his crisp dark hair, as if to sweep the broken thoughts out of his mind,” as if the narrator and even george do not quite know what thoughts the gesture conceals (Bleak House 306). Just as Adam smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) posits the feelings of others as fundamentally unknowable, Dickens’s style represents its own stories as only partially available through narrators’ sympathetic imagination with their narratives. in so doing, these “as if’s” constitute Dickens’s world as a virtual reality, not in our current sense of an artificially reproduced reality,
but in the sense that they conceptualize reality itself as virtual, as the abstract depth of a character.

The physicist John Tyndall explicitly demonstrates the way “as if” translates questions of empirical knowledge into questions of character evaluation. In “The scientific use of the imagination,” an 1870 lecture, Tyndall offers to reveal “some of the more occult features and operations” of the “disciplines of common life,” “to take [his audience] beyond the boundary of mere observation, into a region where things are intellectually discerned, and to show you there the hidden mechanism of optical action” (103). Tyndall represents the subject and method of his science in terms of secret depths and “hidden mechanisms,” the language of the so-called secret somethings that characterizes Esther summerson and David Copperfield.

After drawing a conclusion about light and airborne particles, Tyndall concedes, “You may urge that, although the phenomena occur as if the medium existed, the absolute demonstration of its existence is still wanting” (107). Christopher herbert nicely contextualizes this passage in terms of the Victorian “relativistic imagination,” but its idiom belongs as well to the concomitant histories of literary characterization and character reading (39). But Tyndall then legitimates his hypothesis by imagining another hypothetical case, an analogy, about evaluating the creditability of a person. In other words, Tyndall translates physics into a character, as if its laws could only be known to the degree that a person’s putative interiority could be known. And Tyndall grounds this character evaluation in the semantics of “as if.” We can, he says, only determine the reasonableness of fellow people to the level of “hypothesis,” because they “behave as if they were reasonable.” “As in the case of the ether, beyond the ‘as if’ you cannot go” (Tyndall 108). Thus Tyndall confesses to know light, particles, and air only to the extent that Dickens’s narrators skeptically know their story and his characters skeptically know themselves.

And, for Tyndall, “our skeptical ‘as if,’” not only manifests the act of sympathetic imagination necessary to move from observable phenomena to the “hidden reality” of which they are allegedly the “suggestion” and “outcome,” but “as if” also epitomizes a moral imperative and self-abnegating principle inherent in the proper scientist (116, emphasis original). “As if” bespeaks both the depth of subjects of scientific inquiry and the moral depth of those who study it properly.

Many of the other Victorian novelists who relied upon conditional analogies, like Thackeray, tend to diffuse their conditional similes over several sprawling paragraphs. For instance, in The Newcomes (1853–55)
Thackeray compares realist fiction to Lyellian geology in an elaborate conditional analogy marked by “if,” “yet,” and “suppose”:

All this story is told by one, who, if he was not actually present at the circumstances here narrated, yet had information concerning them, and could supply such a narrative of facts and conversations as is, indeed, not less authentic than the details we have of other histories. how can i tell the feelings in a young lady’s mind; the thoughts in a young gentleman’s bosom?—As professor owen or professor Agassiz takes a fragment of a bone, and builds an enormous forgotten monster out of it, wallowing in primeval quagmires, tearing down leaves and branches of plants that flourished thousands of years ago, and perhaps may be coal by this time—so the novelist puts this and that together: from the footprint finds the foot; from the foot, the brute who trod on it; from the brute, the plant he browsed on, the marsh in which he swam—and thus in his humble way a physiologist too, depicts the habits, size, appearance of the beings whereof he has to treat;—traces this slimy reptile through the mud, and describes his habits filthy and rapacious; prods down this butterfly with a pin, and depicts his beautiful coat and embroidered waistcoat; points out the singular structure of yonder more important animal, the megatherium of his history.

Affecting to apologize for his novel as though it incompletely registered some virtual but knowable reality beyond his grasp, Thackeray here correlates his narrative to the work of speculative archaeology and conjectural history (see also The Newcomes 296–97).

Thackeray’s grammar of virtual reality is too diffuse to discuss here at length, but Elizabeth gaskell uses plenty of concise “as ifs” in Mary Barton (1848) as well as North and South (1885). Both novels rely on the phrase to articulate the disparities between gritty reality and abstract political economy and between the two nations. John Barton says, for instance:

Don’t think to come over me with th’ old tale that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor; i say, if they don’t know, they ought to know. We’re their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows, and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us. (12)

As Catherine gallagher has pointed out, at least “the first half of [Mary Barton] is about the dangers inherent in various conventional ways of organizing reality” (68), and in their most basic form such “as ifs” conventionalize the alienation between man and world that Lukács identified as the fundamental historical condition of the novel (70). But, like Lyell, Dickens, and Tyndall, gaskell also plays with “as if” to personify her landscapes, houses, and things; to articulate characters’ religious faith; to cultivate dramatic irony; and as the signatures of prolepsis (i explain elsewhere that Dickens and gaskell regularly employ “as if” to hint at metaphorical connections that their plots subsequently substantiate). To
reduce gaskell’s and Dickens’s predominant grammar to alienation would be to misread willfully the ways it simultaneously enables extraordinary connections between otherwise estranged domains. The distance their “as if” mediates allows characters and readers to know what ought to be out of their perspective. Thus gaskell portrays the flirtatious alienation between bashful lovers, the perfectly laudable dissimulation between Jem and Mary, with the same speculative mood: “Jem came in . . . as if he had eyes for no one but her father” and “she took up her Bible” and left the room “as if their conversation disturbed her” and so on (75).

Lyell’s and Tyndall’s anxieties over “our skeptical ‘as if’” imply that the conditional analogy was a prominent, recognizable feature of Victorian scientific methodology and composition (Tyndall 116, emphasis original). in turn, Dickens’s and gaskell’s foregrounding of the phrase as a figure of moral complexity suggests that the formal features of literary characterization were and remain relevant to understanding that scientific writing. indeed, they imply that Victorian scientific writing was, in all senses, characterizing the physical world. “As if” is a colloquial marker of one epistemic form, of character abstracted beyond the limitations of fictional persons, that underwrote what counted as knowledge—what Victorians took for granted as literal description—in different genres of writing, fictional and nonfictional. Before the explicit constructivist philosophy of hans Vaihinger’s *The Philosophy of As If* (1911), then, the prevalence of the conditional analogy in Victorian writing reveals that such description or characterization poised Victorians between concrete and virtual reality. To quote John Barton, Victorians wrote “as if [they] were in two worlds” (gaskell 12).

WORKS CITED


