Defining Habits: 
Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition

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It is notorious how powerful is the force of habit.


It is [...] generally felt to be a far easier thing to reform the constitution in Church and State than to reform the least of our own bad habits.

—Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (283)

Describing the powerful force of “daily domestic habit,” Elizabeth Gaskell claimed that “[t]he daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise.” It is the novelist’s task to chronicle “[t]he traditions of [...] bygone times, even to the smallest social particular” in order to “enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character” (2). Whether delineating the constricting habits of social prejudice or the quaint details of domestic routines, Gaskell outlines a theory of habit as a guiding psychological mechanism of social structure that was shared widely by her contemporaries and debated extensively in nineteenth-century psychology. This philosophical dialogue on the function and implications of habitual behavior dated back to associationist philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, David Hartley, and Dugald Stewart, and continued in later-nineteenth-century psychological writings by, among others, George Henry Lewes, John Stuart Mill, James Sully, G. F. Stout, William Carpenter, Henry Maudsley, Alexander Bain, and William James. Theories of habit made further appearances in nineteenth-century advice literature, and were discussed extensively in popular works such as Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Women of England* (1838) and Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* (1859), as well as in magazine articles, religious tracts, sanitary reports, treatises on character formation, and eccentric biographies of
the period. Influenced in part by discoveries in thermodynamics in the
1840s, and grounded in physiological conceptions of mental relations,
nineteenth-century theories of habit affirmed a widespread view of the
mind as an economy, subject to spatial limitations, energy exchange,
and complex patterns of displacement and interdependency. The con-
servation of energy or “force”—that is, the idea that there was a stable
amount of energy in the universe which could be neither increased nor
destroyed, only redistributed—was used to describe a wide variety of re-
lationships between mental processes that, in turn, shaped the most ba-
sic frameworks of consciousness.

At the center of this debate, as it took form in mid- to late-
nineteenth-century England and America, were questions about the sta-
tus of individual agency in biologically based theories of mind. After the
1840s, theories of habit relied on the conservation of energy to explain
the tendency of the mind to reinforce mental patterns, pathways, chan-
nels, or, to use Gaskell’s suggestive term, “chains.” While these patterns
traced the flow of thought and were seen as the structural mechanisms for
all learning, they could also induce a static form of development in which
the individual rehearsed characteristic behaviors rather than evolving new
ones. In later-nineteenth-century discussions of habit, this potential rigid-
ification of human character appeared to pose a threat of psychological
stasis that was often linked to deterministic forces of production and con-
sumption in modern industrial society. Theories of habit conceptualized
the mind as a closed system, driven to repetitive, automatic behaviors in
order to conserve energy for more difficult or novel tasks. Yet many feared
that if the human psyche was biologically compelled to repeat mental ex-
periences, and thus to trap the individual in predictable and inflexible
patterns of behavior, this compulsion constrained possibilities for change
and challenged conceptions of free will. The very capacity for moral trans-
formation was problematized in and by nineteenth-century writings on
habit, as habit became a contested area of psychological debate. It evoked
corns about the status of the individual in an increasingly modern,
mechanized culture in which human behavior, like industrial objects,
might be mass-produced. The psychology of repetition thus came to be
understood not only as the basis of individual eccentricity, but as evidence
of larger cultural routines.

This essay analyzes the competing narratives of mental flexibil-
ity and rigidity in nineteenth-century psychological writings, linking
them in particular to portrayals of repetitive behavior patterns in the
fiction of Charles Dickens, and to the critical debates his characterizations have generated, both in his time and our own. While we expect to find detailed renderings of the formation of character and social structure in the realist fiction of Gaskell or George Eliot, Dickens's characters have, historically, had a more precarious claim to psychological fidelity, and the comic gestures and repetitive behavioral tics that so pervade Dickens's fiction have usually been seen as the least psychologically realistic aspects of his writing.¹ Yet William James recognized the contribution of Victorian fiction to the psychology of habit when he cited the behavior of old ladies, Dickens's minor characters, and Eliot's villagers as examples of the way that the mind repeatedly "stumbled" over its own favorite remembered details and how mental associations became habitual (Principles 538-39).² By situating Dickens within a wider historical context, we can see how his fiction contributed to an ongoing philosophical debate about the social and psychological effects of habit (broadly defined here as patterns of repetitive behavior), and how his very mode of characterization—particularly in his most eccentric characters—confronted the tensions between individuality and mechanization that came to be at the center of this debate.³

Dickens critics have long debated the status of subjectivity and the coherence (or, more recently, incoherence) of identity in Dickens's fiction. Their arguments have ranged from outlining the essential coherence of the Dickensian concept of self to poststructuralist accounts of psychological fragmentation both in and between Dickens's characters. Discussions of characters' habits and eccentricities have sometimes been taken as proof of the stability of identity in Dickens's fiction or, more often, used as grounds for dismissing Dickensian characterization as "superficial," "flat," or lacking in psychological complexity.⁴ Critics who have sought to challenge these accounts, and to argue for a non-essentialist vision of identity in Dickens's fiction, generally have focused on fragmentation and self-contradiction in his characterizations, highlighting the emphasis on role-playing and performance, doublings between characters, and instances of violence and repression in the novels.⁵ They have, in the process, tended to shift their focus away from Dickens's use of repetitive behavior patterns, emphasizing instead the complex and unstable constructions of identity in his fiction, and thus effectively transferring the charge of "superficiality" away from Dickens's characterizations and onto his earlier critics. Conversely, other critics have celebrated Dickens's superficial characterizations as a de-
construction of the subject, as “mere collections of humors or tics” that anticipate the experiments and “cartoon” characters of postmodernism (Clayton 187–88).

In examining Dickens’s delineations of character through eccentric habits of behavior, it is my aim, first, to situate Dickens within a wider nineteenth-century philosophical debate about the psychology and sociology of habit and, second, to demonstrate how the very habits and eccentricities that have long formed the basis of critical dismissals of Dickens’s realism were, in fact, deeply engaged with confronting some of the same psychological and social issues as more mainstream Victorian realists who defined themselves in opposition to Dickens. It is not my purpose, however, to redefine Dickens’s habit-obsessed characters as realistic. Rather, I attempt to show how their habits reveal many of the contradictions both Dickens and writers from other disciplines and genres confronted when conceptualizing the self in the context of an increasingly mechanized industrial culture that implicated individuals in the mass production of goods and repetitive patterns of consumption.

I. Mechanized Minds and New Clothes

Like Gaskell, William James argued that individual habits increased the durability of the social fabric while the social fabric, in turn, shaped the very texture of the human mind. Invoking metaphors of both production and consumption, James describes habit as a conservative social force:

Habit is [...] the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. [...] It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing. Already at the age of twenty-five you see the professional mannerism settling down on the young commercial traveller, on the young doctor, on the young minister, on the young counsellor-at-law. You see the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices, the ways of the “shop,” in a word, from which the man can by-and-by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. On the whole, it is best he should not escape. It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again. (Psychology 152–33)
Demonstrating a profound ambivalence about the social function and value of routine, James examines the political implications of what he sees as a fundamental biological conservatism in mental processes. He conceptualizes the mechanisms involved in the production of habitual behavior patterns, envisioning the early plasticity of the human mind as matched by its rapid solidification, its fixed “lines of cleavage” and inescapable “folds” of mental drapery that “set like plaster.” For James, habits identify the most essential traits of character, those that we think of as defining individuality, making each person gesturally, emotionally, and intellectually unique. Yet in a universe of potentially endless repetition, individual routines reinforce social routines: habits of class, community, and profession shape personal habits of body and mind which, in turn, shape class identity, stratification, and privilege. The conservation of mental energy thereby embeds social and political conservatism in the most basic mechanisms of physiology, giving form to the patterns of individual minds and, by extension, formulating social ideology. The threat of revolution is thwarted by biology, as conservatism is naturalized—and thus made inevitable—in the structure and function of the brain and the impressionability of its tissues.

James’s writings on habit began with an 1887 essay in *Popular Science Monthly*, and eventually expanded into lengthy individual chapters of his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892). Although James formed his ideas in the latter decades of a debate that spanned more than a century, his writings came to represent the fullest articulation of the physiological basis of habit and its psychological, social, and ethical implications. Yet his emphasis on the conservative element of habits skirted fears about overt social management that were already a part of the popular literature on the psychology of habit. We can see the extent to which prescriptive advice about forming and maintaining good habits had become both routinized and questioned in mid-century advice literature in an anonymous 1857 article on “Habits and Resolutions” in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*. The article decries the “drilling” of moral habits, critiquing it as a tool of utilitarian educational philosophy, antithetical to “‘the individuality of the individual’” (480). “It is painful to witness the pedantic trifling in which many young men, bent on ‘forming’ their characters, and well up in maxim-books and manuals of duty, waste time and energy during the most precious period of their lives. [. . .] I would heartily dissuade them from tampering with their characters by fussy resolution-making, and
mechanical attempts at becoming 'bundles of habits'” (480–81). Seem-
ing to echo Thomas Gradgrind’s pedagogical routines in Hard Times (1854), the author here indicates that discussions of habit had become a popular as well as a professional issue, entering into common conduct material. The need to make concerns about habit operative in the culture as a whole suggests just how pervasive the relation between habitual routine and social structure had become.

Theories of habit were divided, however, in identifying the social functions and implications of mental routines. They were further di-
vided—often internally—in conceptualizing habits through metaphors of industrial production and consumption. 6 Whereas the Tait’s author as-
sumes that the conscious attempt to reform habits results in a mass pro-
duction and mechanization of mind, for many writers it was the potential fixity of character in biological explanations of habit that seemed to pre-
clude any capacity for individual reformation, spiritual growth, or free will. As John Weiss asserted in 1870, “One machine will turn out cloth, an-
other shoddy, and another pulp, with no more reliable regularity than our acquaintances will work up their material of character into appro-
priate products” (13). “The laws of the world,” he continues, “appear em-
bodyed in a man’s habits with a precision as inexorable as the radiations of different crystals [. . .] and, the more enslaved a man becomes by the
original tendencies of his nature, the more closely he imitates the me-
chanical life of all material objects” (14). Weiss’s interconnected lan-
guage of politics, economics, and natural history, invoking both the “laws of the world” and the laws of nature, the evils of slavery and the dangers of industrial mechanization, suggests that the submersion of character in routine or habitual behaviors is a psychological problem linked to other forms of social, political, and economic conformity. Writers on habit, whether maintaining or questioning the possibility of self-reform, rou-
tinely invoked the language of mechanization and mass production to make their arguments, expressing concern about the blurring bounda-
ries of man, mind, and machine. The mind was figured alternately as in-
dustrial laborer, the machine operated, or the commodity produced: that is, the mind either tended the mechanized brain, was figured as the ma-
chine itself in the process of mass-producing human behavior, or became the material object produced by mechanization. Stout claims “[t]o act
from habit is to act mechanically” (259), 7 and Weiss asks, “Is the creative mind nothing but the tender of a vast factory filled with machinery, who
moves from point to point, with the sole object of adjusting and keeping
up to working order a variety of inevitable acting?” (15). Employing the language of weavers displaced by textile factories, Weiss argues against the tyranny of habit: “We are [. . .] not machines, with curious automatic adjustments, fitted to the tasks of sixty years, which furnish providence with its mingled warp and woof, and of no object further than to turn out products with a blind precision” (20).

When the mind was not conceptualized in relation to industrial machinery, it was analyzed in terms of its patterns of consumption, that is, its enduring relation to the goods—and particularly the clothing—produced by machines. James thus connected the psychology of habit to the development of class demarcations by describing the plight of the newly rich man who finds he cannot “learn to dress like a gentleman-born. The merchants offer their wares as eagerly to him as to the veriest ‘swell,’ but he simply cannot buy the right things. An invisible law, as strong as gravitation, keeps him within his orbit, arrayed this year as he was the last; and how his better-clad acquaintances contrive to get the things they wear will be for him a mystery till his dying day” (Psychology 133). By figuring habit as a problem of failed consumerism and as an example of the stability of class structure, James identifies a pattern of class anxieties that we find repeated as the subtext of literary and philosophical definitions of habit in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his narrative of the poorly dressed man, James links the psychology of habit to the rigid operations of class segregation. Guided by invisible and ineffable laws of mental energy, the frustrated consumer gravitates toward the same products he has always purchased, doomed to repeat sartorial errors and to remain uninitiated in the mysteries of taste. He becomes, in effect, as predictable as the goods he consumes. Clothing, which constitutes a form of social mediation and a potential opportunity for transformation and disguise, ultimately fails to efface the force of habit. It becomes, for James, an index of character, profession, and class that challenges the social mythology of advertising and the logic of the marketplace.8

The American psychologist B. R. Andrews concurred with James, arguing that habits arising from breeding, education, and childhood environment were the most difficult to break, exerting a “stronger influence on consciousness” than patterns established in adulthood because of the deep channels they had carved into the mind. Thus the most minute details served as markers of the mind’s inflexibility, preventing fluid transitions between classes and effective assimilation into new walks of life:
When these tendencies have once taken form, it is almost impossible to eradicate them—the college boy who puts on the shop-clothes of the mechanic, is still recognizable despite his disguise; he will read a paper while his companions loaf through the noon hour, and “wash up” at night with a care for cleanliness to which they are unaccustomed—at every turn the habits formed in youth shape his present. The Indian boy taken from a wigwam and sent through Carlisle or Hampton, in many instances, after graduation goes back to the wigwam; the tendencies of his earliest years could not be overcome by later training. (144)

As social origins reveal themselves in details of personal hygiene, mental curiosity, residential preference, or sartorial style, we find class lines working as a barrier from both directions. Andrews’s college boy can no more become a natural mechanic than James’s newly rich man can become a natural gentleman. At stake in these conceptualizations of mental and behavioral fixity are claims about the potential futility of social reforms, the inflexibility of racial and ethnic difference, and even the difficulty of sympathetic identification. The wigwam is not merely an artifact of cultural origins; it becomes internalized and thereby structures the Indian boy’s consciousness. A foundational feature of his mental economy, it delimits the boundaries of his ethnic identity and exposes racial difference as a separation of mind as much as body. The ability to bridge such separation is, according to Andrews, a difficult and possibly futile struggle. If the mind consists of rigid and finite patterns that shape the way individuals view the world, then connections between people—the capacity to project oneself imaginatively into the situation of another—might very well be inhibited by acute differences in mental structure. Andrews examines the mental impediments to sympathetic identification:

If I go into a shoe store to inspect a pair of shoes, a series of habitual processes runs through [the] mind corresponding to my questions: “Are these shoes well made? What kind of leather? What sort of a sole? Is this in the spring style? The price? etc.” The questions seem to suggest themselves, without any consciousness of effort, when I am in the familiar position of shoe purchaser. I attempted, however, to think myself into the unfamiliar position of the shoe dealer and conceive what judgments he might pass upon the shoes. I could do it only with effort. The end in view was conscious and the necessary steps toward it were made volitionally. The processes included a determination of the points of interest in the shoes for the dealer, and the judgments he might make upon them. I conceived him as thinking: “The cost of these shoes to me? Do they seem to fit and please the customer? My profits if he takes them? The grade of leather in them? Their manufacturer?” I arrived at these unfamiliar mental results only with consciously directed effort. (157)
As Andrews examines the difficulty of imagining oneself, quite literally, in another's shoes, he finds that to step into the shoes of the shoe dealer is to transform radically one's own experience of consciousness, to replace unconscious mechanisms of thought with the conscious and willed projection of another's imagined vision. "The feeling of effort," he notes, "was localized physiologically about the eyes, as the shoes were examined visually, and the thinking was largely done in visual terms" (137). As Andrews observes, the simple act of viewing a pair of shoes becomes a structural transgression of mental patterns, a breaking of one's own psychological routines. In crossing the social and professional gulf from consumer to tradesman, Andrews finds that imagining oneself as another produces a strain upon the eyes, as if necessitating heroic efforts of vision that disrupt normal (and automatic) channels of thought.

There is a curious narrative convergence in James's and Andrews's examples of habitual behavior that raises a number of questions: Why, one might ask, is consumer culture so often the stage upon which theories of habit are enacted? What is it about our capacity to buy or sell—and particularly to buy or sell articles of clothing—that seems so integral to examining the psychology of habit? It is precisely in the confrontation between economic theories of mind and market economies that arguments about individual agency, subjectivity, and free will become most strained. While the consumer is, according to the mythology of the marketplace, ostensibly free to choose which goods to purchase from an increasingly wide range of commodities, his or her options are limited, according to theorists of habit, by his or her own inability to break free from the patterns of consumer behavior by which he or she was originally conditioned.

Clothing, moreover, provides a particularly suitable means of discussing habitual behavior because it is intimately connected to how the self presents itself to the world. The capacity for disguise offered by a mere change of clothing (as in the college boy's attempt to "disguise" himself in the "shop-clothes" of the mechanic), and the potential play of subjectivity that clothing thus offers, is seemingly contained by a theory of habit that aligns clothing with essential traits of character. Andrew H. Miller has noted the "overdetermined[ed] [...] meaning" of clothing in Victorian culture, citing an 1868 article on "Thoughtfulness in Dress" that claimed, "It is as hard to draw the line between person and dress as between mind and matter, and there is, perhaps, no form of matter into which, and by which,
mind can infuse a more subtle and incalculably radiating influence" (qtd. in Miller 194). The very word “habit” refers, of course, to both behavior and clothing, and clothing composes an essential part of what William James called “the material me.” “We so appropriate our clothes and identify ourselves with them,” James notes, that “the old saying that the human person is composed of three parts—soul, body and clothes—is more than a joke” (Psychology 160). In Henry James’s Portrait of a Lady (1881), Madame Merle articulates a similarly habit-generated theory of character when she questions, “What shall we call our ‘self? Where does it begin? where does it end? […] I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear” (253).

This interweaving of clothing and identity so thoroughly structures the concept of habit that consumer culture routinely becomes a site of psychological crisis, as attempts to alter habits of dress reveal the intractability of both self and society. In Great Expectations (1860–61)—perhaps the most extended Victorian meditation on the anxieties of class and consumption—Dickens explores the psychological traumas of buying new clothes. Pip’s chronic distress about the relationship between clothing and class—his nagging suspicion that his new suit of clothes sets him at a “personal disadvantage, something like Joe’s in his Sunday suit” and necessitates “an immensity of posturing” to make them fit (183)—structures his world view, as he routinely perceives others through their clothing and measures their relation to his own. First recognizing and claiming an affinity with Herbert Pocket through the class demarcations of his dress—“there arose before me the hat, head, neckcloth, waistcoat, trousers, boots, of a member of society of about my own standing” (198)—Pip is nevertheless acutely self-conscious that Herbert “carried off his rather old clothes, much better than I carried off my new suit” (201).

Pip’s anxieties are eventually projected onto other characters’ sartorial dilemmas, and the seemingly intractable markers of profession, class, and caste that habits pose. Dickens highlights Pip’s moments of doubt about the origins of others’ clothing—disjunctions of identity and attire that generate morbid fears, as when Pip suspects the Lord Chief Justice’s proprietor of wearing “mildewed clothes, which had evidently not belonged to him originally, and which, I took it into my head, he had bought cheap of the executioner” (190). These lingering traces of identity in the clothing of the dead find a gruesome parallel in Dickens’s descriptions of his own visits to the Paris morgue. Placing as much
emphasis on the clothing as on the bodies themselves, Dickens describes the hypnotic fascination of each in exactly the same language: “the swollen saturated clothes hanging up, and the water dripping, dripping all day long, upon that other swollen saturated something in the corner” (“Lying Awake” 235–36). Dickens recounts how the body of a drowned man at the morgue made such a “fixed impression” on his mind that he was unable to stop thinking about it for days afterwards, seeing it even (or perhaps especially) while shopping for new clothes:

I might be walking in the Palais Royal, lazily enjoying the shop windows, and might be regaling myself with one of the ready-made clothes shops that are set out there. My eyes, wandering over impossible-waisted dressing-gowns and luminous waistcoats, would fall upon the master, or the shopman, or even the very dummy at the door, and would suggest to me, “something like him!”—and instantly I was sickened again. (“Travelling Abroad” 69–70)

Even after the drowned man is buried, Dickens confesses returning to the morgue “to look at his clothes, and [. . .] I found them frightfully like him—particularly his boots” (70).9 In this figure of a corpse that relentlessly asserts its identity, Dickens registers the powerful linkage of clothing and character, the force of habit and the futility of disguise. Dickens’s descriptions of the clothing in the shop window (“impossible-waisted dressing-gowns”) highlight their disjunctions with his identity, their sense of belonging to another as inescapably as the clothing of the dead.

Dickens’s ruminations on the Paris morgue register his pervasive sense that there are inescapable “habits” of identity—patterns of mental clothing that mark us as distinctly as the clothes we wear. We see this most clearly, perhaps, when Pip attempts to disguise Magwitch through the purchase of a new set of clothes—a scene which marks the culminating moment of Pip’s consumer distress and his most profound realization of the shaping force of social routines. Comparing the effect of Magwitch’s hair in powder to “nothing but the probable effect of rouge upon the dead” (353), Pip recounts the disconcerting results of his purchases:

Next day the clothes I had ordered, all came home, and he put them on. Whatever he put on, became him less (it dismally seemed to me) than what he had worn before. To my thinking, there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him. The more I dressed him and the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes. [. . .] I believe too that he dragged one of his legs as if there were still a weight of iron on it, and that from head to foot there was Convict in the very grain of the man.
The influences of his solitary hut-life were upon him besides, and gave him a savage air that no dress could tame; added to these, were the influences of his subsequent branded life among men, and, crowning all, his consciousness that he was dodging and hiding now. In all his ways of sitting and standing, and eating and drinking—of brooding about, in a high-shouldered reluctant style—of taking out his great horn-handled jack-knife and wiping it on his legs and cutting his food—of lifting light glasses and cups to his lips, as if they were clumsy pannikins—of chopping a wedge off his bread, and soaking up with it the last fragments of gravy round and round his plate, as if to make the most of an allowance, and then drying his finger-ends on it, and then swallowing it—in these ways and a thousand other small nameless instances arising every minute in the day, there was Prisoner, Felon, Bondsman, plain as plain could be. (352-53)

In a striking parallel to the psychological narratives of James and Andrews (among many others), Dickens delineates the overwhelming power of habit to shape both body and mind. Magwitch (and by extension Pip) is unable to erase the pervasive behavioral markers of his origins. A prisoner of habit as much as of the state, Magwitch goes about his daily routine in “a barrack way [. . .] as if it were all put down for him on a slate” (356). In Dickens’s description, the most basic habits of how and what we put into and onto our bodies seem the most defining of identity, recalling Pip’s earlier faux pas of putting his knife in his mouth during his first dinner with Herbert, as well as his pervasive sense of his own sartorial displacement and disguise (203). Like the absurdly ineffective efforts of one of Jaggers’s clients to disguise a criminal witness—a “murderous-looking tall individual”—in the clothes of a “spectable pieman,” “[a] sort of a pastry-cook” (193), Pip’s attempts to transform Magwitch through the purchase of new clothing perversely sets in greater relief the convict’s most intractable habits, “so awful was the manner in which everything in him that it was most desirable to repress, started through that thin layer of pretence” (353). Yet Pip’s dismay at his inability to disguise the convict as a respectable citizen seems to contain a residual sense of relief that clothing alone does not make the man, that the physical and psychological markers of origin and identity cannot be effaced by a mere change of dress. The unsettling appearance of Magwitch in his new set of clothes thus highlights Pip’s hesitations about the kind of social mobility that a successful transformation of the convict (or, by extension, himself) might unleash. In this way, Pip’s account echoes the profound ambivalence about social mobility that we find in James’s writings on habit.

If, as Pip’s failed experiments suggest, individuals cannot easily
or effectively transform (or even disguise) habits of dress, if instead they function as deeply entrenched markers of class origins, then habits themselves—their physiological permanence—would appear to constitute the basis for an essentialist theory of identity that recognizes the forces of cultural construction, but resists the possibility of social, cultural, or individual change. The failure of the consumer, in a marketplace replete with goods, to transcend the entrapments of class through his or her most intimate purchases, not only challenges the mythology of advertising, but seems to promise a fundamental stability—or, from a different perspective, to threaten a fundamental stagnation—of self and society.

Of course, many of the same writers who outlined the most spatially and biologically rigid theories of habit were by no means convinced of the psychological stability such models proposed. William James’s curiosity about hypnosis, telepathy, and spiritualism, for instance, or his discussions of wandering attention, conceptualize the mind in a more profoundly fluid relationship to the outside world than his discussions of habit seem to allow. Indeed, what interests me as a whole is how theories of habit (and related conceptualizations of mental space as fixed, finite, or simply crowded) coexisted with theories of mental permeability and intersubjective exchange that radically challenged the boundaries of mind and coherence of the self, thereby resisting essentialist theories of identity. Thus, while Madame Merle’s testament to the self-determining nature of clothing seems to envision habits of dress as reliable, and thus interpretable, expressions of identity, she simultaneously envisions a liquidity of mind that dissolves the boundaries between self and object. The self, she claims, “overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again” (Portrait of a Lady 253). Dickens offers a parallel model of self-extension in the spectral power and transference of Miss Havisham’s traumatic memories into shaping forces of Estella’s and Pip’s characters; the very objects that serve as Miss Havisham’s emotional repositories—her decayed wedding gown, rotting banquet table, and Satis House—have the same power to occupy the minds of others as Miss Havisham herself.11 This ontological exchange between self and world appears in nineteenth-century discussions of character formation as well. In a book-length study of Character and Characteristic Men (1866), Edwin P. Whipple goes so far as to define “character” as “the embodiment of things in persons” (8). Character consists of the cumulative process of taking in the outside world, involving “a complete assimilation, [...] the
man standing for the thing, having mastered and, as it were, consumed it” (7). Yet this potential absorption of objects into subjects inevitably threatens, as we see in discussions of habit, to turn the other way. If things are embodied in persons, persons may be in danger of slipping into things.

II. Eccentric Habits, Authorial Routines, and *Dombey and Son*

In accounts of normal mental development, habit served to routinize certain actions or thoughts so that they could be performed without conscious attention and volition. In theory, habit freed the mind from routine duties to wander into more important or creative terrains. Yet even the proper function of repetition in a balanced mental economy did not guarantee which behaviors became habitual, and, as Andrews notes, an experience as mundane as the weather could shape the space of consciousness. Andrews recounts how an unusually cold day, reported by the weather service, initiated two or three following days of “weather-minded” thinking, as he found himself uncharacteristically and involuntarily scanning the papers of other cities for weather reports and discussing the weather in random conversations (140). In a similar vein, Lewes cautioned against the repetition of dangerous thoughts, explaining that “[t]o imagine an act is to rehearse it mentally. By such mental rehearsal the motor organs are [...] disposed to respond in act. Hence it is that a long-meditated crime becomes at last an irresistible criminal impulse” (*Problems* 459). And John T. Prince proposed that “[c]rankiness” and habitual “intoleran[ce] of the opinions of others” were the dangerous results of “[t]rivial and vacillating thoughts” occupying too much mental space, thereby forming “channel[s]” in the mind that are “so narrow as not to permit the entrance and flow of other streams of thought than the one which engrosses the mind” (233). Indeed, we find psychological treatises and advice manuals offering a veritable catalogue of eccentric and unproductive habits, “nervous tics and twitches, and irresistible tricks of thought and act” (Lewes, *Problems* 54). Samuel Smiles cautions against “habit[s] of desultory reading, [...] fitfulness and ineffective working” (308) as well as the “habit of intellectual dissipation,” with its “thoroughlyemasculating effect” upon “mind and character” (311). Both Stout and Andrews discuss “habits of punning” (Andrews 141), and James offers the “habit of snuffling,” “of biting one’s nails,” or of
"putting one's hands into one's pockets," as examples of habitual pathways through the nerve centers (Psychology 127-28). (Here, Ralph Tuchett's characteristic stance in Portrait of a Lady, hands in pockets, comes to mind.) In an article on "Irrational Habits," from the Spectator, we find obsessive behaviors categorized into habits of unreasonable doubting, such as repeatedly taking one's temperature, habitually counting one's "goods and chattels," or constantly checking for one's umbrella (a subject taken up extensively in Dickens's Household Words); and habits of "touching" and "placing," which range from common preoccupations such as "fidgeting with objects when writing," "screw[ing] up" a "heap of woolly fluff [...] into little pellets," or "finger[ing] [...] a child's woolly animal" to more serious forms of repetition (41-42). The author recounts the case of one man "who became so possessed with the 'touching' mania that he felt compelled to knock his dressing-table at each end ninety times every morning, and was entirely unable to settle for the night until his bed had been touched thirty times. As may be imagined, the habit grew to such an extent that at length a letter had to be tapped five hundred times before it could be despatched!" (41).

These examples of habit gone astray suggest the easy passage from innocuous habits to pathological ones, and the progressive multiplications of habitual actions find parallels in medical accounts of bodily tics and grimaces. In one such account, the American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell diagnoses a condition he calls "habit chorea," a kind of addiction to habit, in which the formation of habits itself becomes habitual. Mitchell recounts two cases in children in which "the variety and obstinacy of the habits" causes alarm, especially when "the little patient has a large repertory of these performances, and will execute a remarkable variety in one day" (156-57). The first patient's symptoms include a "slight hacking cough" (lasting almost four years), "succeeded by a sort of sniffing" with a "grimace, always on the left side" accompanied by "push[ing] her cheek up with the left hand" (158). Mitchell's second patient's "bundle of habits" is even more varied and spectacular:

In this lad the twitches began with snapping of the eyes [...] [and] a curious rolling of the head, difficult to describe. This was bad enough, but quite suddenly, within a few days, the face became more quiet, and there arose a disorder of the abdominal muscles, which were abruptly contracted at intervals. [...] After a month or two of these movements, the respiration was broken every few minutes by a long drawn,
abrupt inspiratory act. Still later the head was affected, or rather the neck, with a little, short, negative shake. The abdominal and respiratory disorder gave way at last to shrugging of one shoulder, and then to this with a queer upward pull of the whole side. The worst attack lasted but a few weeks, and was a sort of straightening up of the body. These varying conditions endured for several years. [ . . . ] It was a slight grimace to-day, and in a week or two it was a sudden action of the muscles of the back or a shrug or a spasm of the muscles of the belly. (160-61)

As one habit succeeds another, with an impressive array of twitches, grimaces, shrugs, and shakes, Mitchell’s case history is overtaken by the sheer spectacle of habits proliferating out of control. Here, characteristic habits do not simply define the individual; rather, these patients become the living embodiment of what we might call “habit for habit’s sake.” In an ever-multiplying repertoire of spasmodic tics, these habits both defy the principle of habit (by constantly changing), and yet make such changes themselves habitual. As mental energy is merely channeled from one tic to another, it becomes, in effect, a perfect cycle of balance and exchange, a mental economy in a state of perpetual motion and endless repetition, a mind overtaken by the principle of habit in its purest, most concentrated form. Mitchell’s patients and their spectacular symptoms question the fundamental principles of habit formation, exploring the psychology of repetition (and the boundaries of identity) through a condition in which habits, quite literally, occupy the mind.

This nineteenth-century fascination with eccentric personalities, nervous habits, and quirky behavior is, of course, nowhere more pronounced than in Dickens’s fiction. Dickens’s novels jar the reader with repetitive character patterns, displaying eccentric personalities through their verbal, gestural, and sartorial tics. These “spasmodic habit[s]” (Dombey and Son 55) form the very basis of characterization in Dickens and correspond to discussions of idiosyncrasy and character formation in eccentric biographies and treatises on character in the early- to mid-nineteenth century.12 In Character and Characteristic Men, Whipple includes Dickens in his chapter on “Eccentric Character” as one of the literary authors most proficient in portraying the psychology of eccentricity. Whipple explains the quirky habits of eccentrics in true Dickensian style, as bursts and splutters of the mind:

The little brain [that eccentrics] have, thus galvanized by constant contact with the personal pronoun, presents a grand exhibition of mediocrity in convulsions, of spite in spasms, of impulses in insurrection animating thoughts in heaps. Commonplaces are made to look like novelties by being shot forth in hysteric bursts. [ . . . ] Yet
through all the jar, and discord, and fussy miscreativeness of such chaotic minds there runs an unmistakable individuality. (38)

Whipple grudgingly admits that the disconcerting habits of the eccentric's disordered mind—those convulsions, spasms, and hysterical bursts—represent the essence of his individuality. This point is made even more clearly, of course, in Dickens's fiction, and Whipple notes that literary genius, "though often itself bristling with eccentricities, has been quick to discern, and cunning to embody, the eccentricities of others" (58).

For Dickens, delineating the habits of eccentric characters becomes habit-forming for the author as well. In the 1867 Preface to *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), Dickens begins with a striking conflation of artistic craft and involuntary action, discussing his own complicity and participation in habitual behavior. He describes a kind of authorial meta-habit of observing the routines of others in order, habitually, to transcribe them into literary form: "I make so bold as to believe that the faculty (or the habit) of correctly observing the characters of men, is a rare one. I have not even found, within my experience, that the faculty (or the habit) of correctly observing so much as the faces of men, is a general one by any means" (43). The repetition of Dickens's parenthetical statement "or the habit" intrudes upon his sentences as one of the very habits he claims to observe and describe, linking the author as character to the characters he creates, and enacting literary style as verbal tic. The Preface goes on to assert the fundamental stability of character in the novel and to link it to Dickens's own fixed mental associations. Yet Dickens's perspective on habit is more complex than his Preface suggests. If the habit of closely observing character is a positive trait in an author, habit itself, as a psychological phenomenon, is not nearly so productive in the characters he portrays. Throughout *Dombey and Son*, Dickens delineates the deadening effects of routine and provides his most explicit meditation upon and most detailed critique of eccentric and habitual behaviors by displaying them in figures who cannot escape their own peculiar compulsions.13

In a pattern familiar to Dickens's readers, *Dombey and Son* first introduces us to characters through their habits. His very concept of character is predicated on observable repetitions of thought, speech, and action. Dickens's novels enact the belief, expressed by one nineteenth-century psychologist, that "strongly marked peculiarity" forms the es-
sence of human character. The absence of such peculiarity dooms one to an “enduring [. . . ] insignificance” (Weiss 12). Peculiar habits abound in Dickens’s characters. From Mr. Dombey’s habitual jingling of his gold watch chain (49, 51) to the perpetually tilted head of Miss Tox from “a long habit of listening admiringly to everything that was said in her presence” (55) to Mr. Chick’s “peculiar little monosyllabic cough; a sort of primer, or easy introduction to the art of coughing” (489), Dickens highlights the gestures that make individuals unique. But while Dickens’s delineations of characters through their habits correspond to psychological theories that envisioned rigid channels in the mind, habits do not function, for Dickens, in an entirely self-enclosed system. Rather, in a balanced economy of behavioral exchange, one person’s mannerisms produce corresponding mannerisms in others. Thus Mr. Chick’s habit of keeping “his hands continually in his pockets” and whistling and humming tunes (61) leads, in turn, to Mrs. Chick’s custom of criticizing Mr. Chick’s whistling, which leads, in turn, to his repeated claim that it is merely a “habit”: “Habit!” she exclaims, “If I was to get a habit (as you call it) of walking on the ceiling, like the flies, I should hear enough of it, I daresay.” It appeared so probable that such a habit might be attended with some degree of notoriety, that Mr. Chick didn’t venture to dispute the position” (62). The formation, exchange, and intensification of habits between Dickens’s characters—their fundamental co-dependency, so to speak—challenges psychological representations of habit as a self-enclosed system. Dickens recognizes that habits are formed perhaps primarily in response to the habits of others. Thus the origins of one’s own habits are often murky, leading one character to observe: “I hardly know how I ever got here—creature that I am, not only of my own habit, but of other people’s!” (560).

Dickens’s self-conscious attention to habit is more pronounced in Dombey and Son than in much of his other fiction, appearing not only in critical exchanges between characters concerning each others’ annoying habits, but also in Dickens’s conflation of habit, repetition, and routine. Verbal repetitions frequently mark moments in the novel when language has been emptied of emotional meaning; they signal the tendency for minds to behave increasingly like machines. Philosophical discussions of habit routinely commented on the absence of consciousness and deadening of affect in habitual behavior patterns: “in all such habitual functioning, the mental processes are accompanied by no distinct feeling-tone. They are quite indifferent” (Andrews
135). Because the psychological function of habit was, apparently, to empty routine behaviors from consciousness, thereby enabling them to take place with a minimal expenditure of energy, habits effectively circumvented conscious mental processes such as attention, volition, or emotion, that specifically required focused energy. Yet it is this very absence of thought or feeling that most disturbs Dickens in his interrogation of habitual behaviors. Habits are dangerous precisely because they do not necessitate consciousness or evoke emotion. Paradoxically responsible for both human individuality and mechanicality, habits make people unique while simultaneously threatening to transform them into things. As the psychological writings I have discussed indicate, there was considerable tension, even contradiction, between the formulation of habit as eccentricity and habit as routine. Whereas eccentricity involves a form of repetitive behavior that defines individuality in opposition to social conformity, routine implies the objectification, mechanization, or mass production of character as a result of conformity.\textsuperscript{15}

In an 1855 issue of Dickens’s magazine \textit{Household Words}, an article entitled simply “Routine” diagnosed “stupid, mischievous, fatal Routine” as “[t]he greatest disorder carried on under an appearance of order; the culture of forms with a neglect of realities; the employment of means without a reference to the end; the part setting up itself as independent of the whole to which it belongs; the automaton imitating the work of the living, thinking man” (Gostick 550). Although the article was not written by Dickens himself, we hear echoes of Chancery Court and the “Circumlocution Office,” in which habit and routine have been made systematic parts of the social body, turning meaningless repetition into the fundamental characteristic of modern institutions. In \textit{Dombey and Son}, it is the deadening routine of business that summarizes the overall sterility of social relations in Dickens’s world, transforming men into clockwork machinery through the process and effects of habit. At various points in the novel, Mr. Dombey’s clerk comments on this inability to accommodate or even recognize change:

“But we go on,” said her visitor [Mr. Morfin], rubbing his forehead, in an absent manner, with his hand, and then drumming thoughtfully on the table, “we go on in our clockwork routine, from day to day, and can’t make out, or follow, these changes. They—they’re a metaphysical sort of thing. We—we haven’t leisure for it. We—we haven’t courage. They’re not taught at schools or colleges, and we don’t know how to set about it. In short, we are so d——d business-like,” said the gentle-
man, walking to the window, and back, and sitting down again, in a state of extreme dissatisfaction and vexation.

"I am sure," said the gentleman, rubbing his forehead again; and drumming on the table as before, "I have good reason to believe that a jog-trot life, the same from day to day, would reconcile one to anything. One don't see anything, one don't hear anything, one don't know anything; that's the fact. We go on taking everything for granted, and so we go on, until whatever we do, good, bad, or indifferent, we do from habit. Habit is all I shall have to report, when I am called upon to plead to my conscience, on my death-bed. 'Habit,' says I: 'I was deaf, dumb, blind, and paralytic, to a million things, from habit.' Very business-like indeed, Mr. What's-your-name,' says Conscience, 'but it won't do here!'" (559-60)

In his diatribe on the deadening effects of habit, Mr. Morfin exhibits a veritable catalogue of habitual behaviors, twice rubbing his forehead, three times stuttering over his pronouns, repeatedly drumming on the table, and routinely pacing back and forth between the window and his seat. Furthermore, his self-accusatory attacks upon habit become themselves habitual in Dombey and Son, appearing regularly whenever Mr. Morfin appears. Mr. Morfin, in effect, has a habit of forming habits, and a habit of attacking the habits he has formed. Dickens is clearly playing with his own conventions of character here, and including his own literary tics as part of a wider critique of social and economic routines. A fictional exemplar of Mitchell's "habit chorea," Mr. Morfin is both the habit-obsessed patient and the doctor obsessed by his patients' habits. He diagnoses his own disease (and the disease of industrial culture) in the midst of performing it, reflecting both subject and object simultaneously.

A complicit part of a wider pattern of social stagnation, Mr. Morfin, having "let everything about [...] [him] go on, day by day, unquestioned, like a great machine" (840), ultimately seeks to dismantle the very machine in which he has become a cog. This process of disassembly exposes habit as the central psychological cause of the deadening of humanity in industrial culture. If habit is, by definition, automatic, unconscious, and conserving of energy, then to make habitual behaviors conscious, volitional, and perhaps most importantly, emotional, is potentially to break the grip of routine. We see this process at work in Dombey and Son, not only in Mr. Morfin's exposé of habit, which brings habits to consciousness and thereby reshapes them into active thought, but in his, and Florence Dombey's, extensions of sympathy. Because sympathy involves attempting to project oneself into the situation—even the mind—of another, it potentially challenges and breaks down the rigidity of routine mental pathways, those "habit[s] [...] that
harden [...] us from day to day, according to the temper of our clay, like images, and leave [...] us as susceptible as images to new impressions and convictions" (Domby and Son 840). For Dickens, habit and sympathy are antithetical. The hardened "images" of habit are precisely what prevent the susceptibility, impressionability, and self-extension of sympathy. Thus Mr. Morfin's offers of assistance to the persecuted John Carker, or Florence Dombey's sympathetic identification with, and emotional attachment to, friends from different classes of life, constitute challenges to the rigidity of class structure and the mass production of the mind. To learn to feel, in Domby and Son, is potentially to transform one's mental economy. Demonstrating their habitual lack of emotional commodities, the firm of "Dombey and Son had often dealt in hides, but never in hearts" (50).

Yet feelings themselves may be in danger of becoming automatic, just as Mr. Morfin's critique of habit becomes itself a habit. The constancy of Florence Dombey's love for her unresponsive father is, Dickens implies, as habitual as his refusal of that love: "[S]he alone had turned the same mild gentle look upon him always. Yes, to the latest and the last. She had never changed to him—nor had he ever changed to her" (935). While Dickens clearly values the humanizing routine of Florence's love over the dehumanizing routine of her father's business, their common participation in habitual mental patterns suggests a pervasive doubt in the novel about the capacity for psychological growth or transformation. Even the strongest of emotions may merely carve a new pathway, as many nineteenth-century psychologists believed, allowing subsequent, similar emotional experiences to become routine. As "feelings [...] become habitual, they pass to indifference," Andrews claims (139), and Bishop Butler notes how sympathetic feelings can be blunted by repetition: "[L]et a man set himself to attend to, inquire out, and relieve distressed persons, and he cannot but grow less and less sensibly affected with the various miseries of life with which he must become acquainted" (qtd. in Stout 266). In a passage that could be describing Florence Dombey, Lewes discusses the potential for sympathy to become habitual: we "see in many highly wrought natures [...] an habitual outwush of the emotional force in sympathetic channels" (Problems 387). According to this model, changes in one's mental economy (such as the experience of powerful emotion or the extension of sympathy) are ultimately reabsorbed, and simply rechanneled, into new, but equally predictable, patterns. Conversely, the physiological
need for repetition might prove so strong that individuals' very lives would be endangered by a change of routine. As one early-nineteenth-century medical treatise on habit cautioned, "Whoever should attempt to alter such habits, whether hurtful or beneficial, would bring his patients into great danger" ("On the Power of Habit" 334). Such individuals could only be restored, the author implies, by the resumption of routine. Thus, one of the final images of Dombey and Son is of Florence singing the same song over and over to a mentally and physically shattered Mr. Dombey. She "sang the old tune she had so often sung to the dead child. He could not bear it at the time; he held up his trembling hand, imploring her to stop; but next day he asked her to repeat it, and to do so often of an evening; which she did" (959). In this vision of the healing power of repetition to a mind shattered by change, Dickens implies that the process of psychological repair issues not merely from the emotional force of the lullaby and the memories it invokes, which are initially experienced as mental pain, but from its reiteration. If habit has emotionally deadened Florence's father, it may also structure his capacity for emotional renewal.

Yet, like others writing on the psychology of habit, Dickens speculates that the force of repetition is so compelling, and so intricately linked to the formation of character, that it may preclude the capacity for change. Dickens's 1867 Preface to the novel notes that Mr. Dombey's character has been commonly misread as reformed by the end of the story. Steadfast in maintaining the force of habit, Dickens asserts that "Mr. Dombey undergoes no violent change, either in this book, or in real life. A sense of his injustice is within him, all along" (43). There is a fundamental tension in the novel, and in theories of habit as a whole, between, on the one hand, a belief in the possibility of reform, the transformation of character, and the infusion of emotional energy into the static rituals of modern industrial culture, and, on the other hand, a fear that "the tendency of any mental process [...] to repeat itself" will make the mechanization of mind and character an inevitable product of cultural routines (Stout 263).

Ultimately, the tension between eccentricity (which seems to define individuality in opposition to social conformity) and routine (which implies the objectification, mechanization, or mass production of character as a result of conformity) both energizes and complicates Dickens's deployment of habit as a mode of characterization. Like more mainstream psychologists, neurologists, and philosophers of mind
(both preceding and following him), Dickens explored the paradoxes of habitual behavior as both the basis of social conformity and the basis of individuality. If we view Dickens’s habit-obsessed characters merely as quirky, charming, potentially postmodern, but ultimately isolated bundles of eccentricity in a larger Victorian trajectory toward the complex psychological rendering of interior life, we overlook the pervasive fascination with (and multiple theories of) eccentric habits and repetitive behaviors in Victorian culture. In these intersecting narratives of character formation and social stagnation, mental flexibility and rigidity, Dickens and other philosophers of habit not only confronted but reproduced the troubling convergence of individual and cultural routines. In the process, they helped to theorize the relationship between individuality and mechanization in modern industrial culture, and to map its effects on the human mind.

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NOTES

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Dickens’s minor characters—usually his most habit-obsessed—have often been situated in the history of artistic and literary caricature, dating back to the eighteenth century. See, for example, Ruskin 171; Tamlng 315. For studies of Dickens, caricature, and the visual arts, see Ericksen; Hollington; Hunt; Lettis; Ormond. For an excellent recent summary of this tradition and an innovative reading of Dickensian caricature and synecdoche as simultaneously the abstraction of definitive body parts into commodities and the attempt to erase or forget such abstraction, see Novak.

Darwin also drew upon the behavior of fictional characters to illustrate the role of heredity and “the principle of associated habit” in the expression of emotion (78), citing examples from Margaret Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks (1866) and The Brownlows (1868) (80, 270), Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1848) (150), and Dickens’s Oliver Twist (1838) (241). Although Darwin discusses habit as a powerful shaping force in human behavior, he does not frame it in terms of individuality and eccentricity as James and Dickens do. Rather, habits appear as physical and mental traces of evolutionary origins, links between human and animal behavior patterns.

Michael S. Kearns has identified Dickens’s extensive application of associationist psychology in his writings. Drawing upon the writings of nineteenth-century psychologists such as Lewes, Bain, and Mill, Kearns emphasizes how the channels and pathways that they posit as the mechanisms of mental associations shape “the experience of moral
transformation" in Dickens's fiction ("Associationism" 111). My focus on psychological theories of habit in many of these same writers emphasizes, in contrast, their concern with fixed patterns of behavior and the tension between habits as the basis of individuality and the entrapments of cultural and industrial routines. I argue, that is, that theories of habit growing out of associationist philosophy often questioned the very capacity for "moral transformation" that Kearns celebrates.

Criticism of Dickens's characterization was frequent in the nineteenth century, and included George Eliot's 1856 description of Dickens's art as concerning itself exclusively with the "external traits" of individuals (specifically "idiom and manners") at the expense of "psychological character" (111) and Henry James's 1865 dismissal of Dickens as a "superficial novelist" (Theory of Fiction 213). In 1872, Lewes described Dickens's characters as "merely masks,—not characters, but personified characteristics, caricatures and distortions of human nature [ . . . ] moving like pieces of simple mechanism always in one way" ("Dickens" 146). This pattern of critical dismissal has continued well into the twentieth century. In 1927, E. M. Forster included Dickens's fiction in his influential distinctions between "round" and "flat" characters (71-73), and subsequent critics ranging from George Orwell to W. J. Harvey have elaborated upon these claims. For more comprehensive discussions of the critical debate over Dickensian characterization in relation to the development of realism in the nineteenth century, see Chase 96; Ford 129-55; Rosenberg 6-30.

In his poststructuralist celebration of Dickens as challenging the stability and coherence of the concept of "self," James Kincaid argues that "the lines between performers and performance, roles and role-players are always blurred" (77). Karen Chase proposes fragmentation as the central principle of Dickens's representation of personality, arguing that Dickens "assails the unity of personality and decomposes the integral self into a complex of fragments" (126). The components of personality are distributed, according to Chase, among different Dickens characters, forming "an alliance of fragments who together possess a range of responses not available to individuals" (38). John Kucich explores the complex tensions and contradictions in Dickens's portrayals of characters—their "convoluted, contrapuntal internal harmonies" (244) and "inwardly initiated self-conflicts" (246). Brian Rosenberg highlights the irreconcilable contradictions and fragmentations, doubleness and opposition, and structural tensions in Dickens's characterizations (26).

Although there are of course crucial distinctions between production and consumption as tropes for envisioning habit in relation to industrial or machine culture (some of which I go on to examine), my central emphasis in this study is on the ways in which both production and consumption were conceptualized as forms of repetition and invoked to describe mechanical patterns of human behavior.

Workwomen in a garment factory, Stout continues—with an anecdote quoted from Carpenter—refused to go to work for a fortnight, "merely because they were required to make a slight alteration [ . . . ] in the pattern of a particular garment" (qtd. in Stout 259).

While James emphasizes the entrenched differences of class in his narrative of the poorly dressed man, his writings include just as many examples of "professional mannerism[s]" as forms of habitual behavior (Psychology 133). Although there are important differences between class status and professional identity, I include them together here.
because in most nineteenth-century writings on habit they appear as interchangeable examples of the social construction of individual behavior patterns.

Dickens explicitly uses this experience to theorize about mental impressionability and association. Having seen a child brought by its mother to view the same dead body that had taken "possession" of his own thoughts for a week (69), Dickens finds himself similarly haunted by the child's (imagined) mind. He delineates the trajectory of morbid habits of thought and the early plasticity of children's minds in language that parallels James's and other philosophers' discussions of habit. "At that impressive time of life, it must sometimes produce a fixed impression. If the fixed impression be of an object terrible to the child, it will be (for want of reasoning upon) inseparable from great fear. Force the child at such a time, be Spartan with it, send it into the dark against its will, [. . .] and you had better murder it" ("Travelling Abroad" 70). By the end of Dickens's discussion of child psychology, the child has mentally and rhetorically exchanged places with the dead body she has viewed. This description also, of course, parallels Dickens's own account of the origins of Pip's mental habits, his "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things" in meeting Magwitch upon the marshes (35).

Upon failing to produce a respectable gentleman, Pip ultimately chooses for Magwitch an identity as close to the convict's class origins and drifting lifestyle as possible—a river pilot.

Dorothy Van Ghent recognized this pervasive interchangeability of objects and persons in Dickens's fiction in her classic essay, "The Dickens World" (24–25). For an innovative account of the absorption of self into others in Great Expectations, and of the instability of the concept of self in Dickens more generally, see Kincaid 84–87. While claiming that all of Dickens's characterizations function as "performances," Kincaid distinguishes between two fundamentally different types of characters (and modes of characterization): the "steadfast" and the "irresponsible" (76). It is the playful, irresponsible characters whose performances "subvert" our "assumptions about selfhood" (76).

We can see the direct influence of eccentric biographies on Dickens's delineations of character and habit formation in Our Mutual Friend (1864–65). When Mr. Boffin becomes obsessed with reading about misers, he begins to collect eccentric biographies and to recount stories of misers that appeared regularly in this genre. Dickens's library contained a number of these works, including R. S. Kirby's six-volume The Wonderful and Scientific Museum or, Magazine of Remarkable Characters (1803–20), Henry Wilson and James Caulfield's three-volume Wonderful Characters; Comprising Memoirs and Anecdotes of the Most Remarkable Persons of Every Age and Nation (1821), and F. Somner Merryweather's Lives and Anecdotes of Miser; or the Passion of Avarice Displayed (1850).

J. Hillis Miller notes the emphasis on habit in Dombey and Son, arguing that Dickens used the term "to define the enclosure of personality within itself and within the things it has transformed into a mirror of itself" (145). In his study of the Romantic concept of self in Dickens, Lawrence Frank has argued that habit, for Dickens in general and Dombey and Son in particular, signals the "death" of the "dynamic self" (20).

It may seem perverse to focus on Dombey and Son as Dickens's most extensive meditation on habit when it has been so widely and long recognized as a novel about change, most influentially in Chapter Eight of Steven Marcus's Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey. Yet it is the tension between industrial mechanization (symbolized most concretely, as Marcus argues, in the railroad) as the emblem of a changing world and the dan-
gerous mechanizations of character (symbolized most concretely in habitual behavior patterns) that constitutes the complexity of Dickens's view of the relationship between character and society. See also Baumgarten for a discussion of the railway as an "index of modernity" (77) in relation to Dickens's anxieties about mass culture, industrialization, and the circulation of print.

This contradiction is particularly acute in Dickens's fiction, apparent not only in his meditations on habit, but also in the pervasive linguistic slippage between people and objects, bodies, and commodities, that critics ranging from Van Ghent to Gallagher have noted (though in crucially different ways), and that becomes most extravagant in Our Mutual Friend.

We find a similar antithesis between habit and sympathy in many of Lewes's and other psychologists' writings. Indeed, in discussing critical responses to Dickens, Lewes notes the tendency of critical minds to move in "already-trodden tracks" and to "judge according to precedent," thereby substituting habitual patterns of thought for the "flexibility" of "sympathetic insight" ("Dickens" 141). It is ironic to note that Lewes attributes to Dickens's critics the same psychological characteristics of reliance on habit and mechanical judgment that he finds unrealistic in Dickens's characters. That is, he unintentionally validates Dickens's psychology by emphasizing the forces of habit in guiding critical judgment, effectively turning literary critics into Dickensian characters.

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