Gillian Piggott. ***Dickens and Benjamin: Moments of Revelation, Fragments of Modernity.*** Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. Pp xviii + 256. $119.95; £65.

Gillian Piggott's study of the resonances between the work of Charles Dickens and Walter Benjamin arrives in the wake of an increasing critical interest in Benjamin's life and thought, as an array of books from Graham Gilloch's *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996) to Esther Leslie's biographical *Walter Benjamin* (2007), and beyond, makes clear. While many critics have addressed Benjamin's importance to discussions of nineteenth-century modernity, Piggott's is the first book-length attempt to compare Benjamin and Dickens. Her goal is to produce a "creative comparison of the authors' responses to modernity" (4) rather than establish direct lines of influence, though she points out that Benjamin was aware of at least some of Dickens's work, particularly *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Great Expectations* (11), and included fifteen entries about him in the *Arcades Project* (1927–40).

With the aim of thematic comparison in mind, Piggott divides her book into two parts (consisting of two chapters each), the first looking at the messianic and the baroque in the two writers, focusing mainly upon *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and the second looking at the city in terms of experience, memory, the *flâneur* and the crowd – all key categories for Benjamin. This second section considers a number of Dickens's works, including *Sketches by Boz*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield*, with the latter being the subject of a close study of Dickens's approach to memory.

In the first part, Piggott explores Benjamin's "Messianic Worldview" (21), drawing upon his early pre-Marxist writings, such as the essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916), to argue for a correlation between his philosophical outlook and that of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This is fertile ground, since Dickens's novel is the topic of a 1931 essay by Theodor Adorno, quoted by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, which views it as the site of a melancholy decay of the pre-capitalist subject in the face of an encroaching commodity culture. Such a world, however, still offers some potential for transformation. For Piggott, Benjamin's outlook is more religiously inflected than Adorno's, influenced by the Jewish belief that a messiah will arrive to bring about "a massive uprooting and total destruction of the existing order" (21). As a result, her reading of Dickens's novel focuses on the religious dimension of Nell's suffering, viewing her as a messianic figure "mired in sin and/or suffering" who "can at the same time experience [her]self as, or appear to others to be, redeemed" (36). Such redemption comes when truth, the absolute or God floods in upon everyday experience,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as when Nell, sitting in the chapel in the latter part of the novel, pictures her own death in a state of contentment (47).

While such a reading of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is compelling on its own terms, it tends to produce a picture of Benjamin which elides the differences between him and the messianism upon which he draws. At one point, for instance, "Benjamin's messianic theology" and "Jewish messianic thinking" (27) are taken for synonyms. This gives us a nostalgic, religious Benjamin who is perpetually attempting to restore a broken world to a state of wholeness; an idealist figure in the mold of the German Romantics, who believes in a fixed, transcendent absolute and whose attitude to modernity is one of mourning. Typical is Piggott's claim that "For Benjamin, there is an urgent need for remembrance, for recognition of redemptive moments and religious meaning" (50). While this captures one side of Benjamin, it does not give sufficient credit to his adaptation and transformation of the messianic tradition, which makes the messianic a moment of radical revolutionary opening at least as much as a return to what has been lost. Although precisely what Benjamin means by "truth" is a difficult question, as the lengthy discussion of this concept in the opening section of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) testifies, it is not clear that it should be understood purely or even primarily in religious terms, as Piggott proposes. Later in the book Piggott recognizes that Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (first version 1935) offers an "apparent celebration of the possible further changes in experience wrought by new technologies" (93); this utopian side to his modernity is not, however, fully accounted for in the opening chapters.

In the second, more substantial part of the book, Piggott turns to Benjamin and Dickens's respective approaches to the city, a more familiar point of connection, perhaps, for Dickens specialists. Piggott spends time here reflecting upon the important distinction Benjamin makes between *Erfahrung* ("deeper, more reflective and meaningful experience" (92)) and *Erlebnis* ("a case of living the immediate and trivialized passing moment" (92)), the latter of which Benjamin sees as the condition of modern urban life. Tracing Dickens's ideas about experience in the city, both in the journalism and the novels, Piggott finds him articulating a similar concept of shock experience (*Chockerlebnis*) to that found in Benjamin. In "A Flight" (1851), for instance, Dickens effectively evokes the way train travel produces new sensations and distorts memory, making the article "a revolutionary piece in the context of nineteenth-century writing and the expression of modern urban experience" (103). Similar moments capturing the immediacy and fragmentation of the modern city are identified in Dickens's novels, such as Carker's destruction by the train in *Dombey and Son* (109), Jonas Chuzzlewit's shocked state after murdering Tigg Montague (113–14) and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the experience of Grandfather Trent as he gambles in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (115–18). Benjamin's view of memory as fractured and fragmented, allowing only glimpses of the past to emerge, is explored further in relation to *David Copperfield*, Piggott arguing that David's attitude to time and space "anticipates Benjamin's theorization of the fact that the labyrinthine city prompts one's encounter with oneself and memory, governing and recovering experience itself" (131).

In the last chapter Piggott discusses the relevance to Dickens of Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur*, suggesting that the novelist's habit of wandering in the city aligns him with Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin's paradigmatic *flâneur* and poet, for whom thinking, walking and writing coincide. Baudelaire, like Dickens, was obsessed with repetition and re-creation (167). Piggott draws attention, too, to David Copperfield's observation that in the city streets "every stone was a boy's book to me" (131, 160), taking this as evidence that Dickens's creativity was "wired up to the energy of the city, being fed by it and feeding back into it" (161). Ultimately, though, Piggott finds Dickens to be more socially engaged than Benjamin's typical *flâneur*, his work too "full of moral prescription and political satire" (175) to wholly embody the characteristics of this detached figure.

Piggott also looks at the crowd, a site where Benjamin's concepts of shock experience and *flânerie* come together as the isolated subject is confronted with something incomprehensible and overwhelming. Dickens, Piggott suggests, also sees crowds in this way and frequently "seems unable to conceive of a crowd unless it is through the concept of a multitude in contrast to a singularity" (178), something Piggott identifies in the crowd scenes in *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. She argues, too, that Dickens's use of the crowd is associated with his employment of a "gothic mode" (204), an aesthetic which develops out of his awareness of the "fearful unmasterability of the city" (205). The crowd is a point of particular interest for Piggott, featuring in an appendix that argues for its political significance in Dickens, in contradistinction to Baudelaire, of whom Benjamin wrote "[his] mass conspicuously lacks any social or political significance as a class" (223). Some of the book's most intriguing and multi-faceted analysis comes in these later discussions, which engage closely with the nature of experience in the modern city.

Overall, *Dickens and Benjamin* is a careful study of points of connection between two major figures who sought to explore modernity in sometimes divergent, but often parallel ways. If its depiction of Benjamin's theology in the opening part is a weakness, then its strengths are a wide-ranging reading of Dickens and the illuminating connections it draws between the writers' accounts of urban experience and the crowd. Perhaps most importantly, the book shows that the encounter between Dickens and Benjamin remains

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

highly productive, and that it promises to yield more flashes of insight in future.

University of Manchester Ben Moore

David S. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser, eds. Thomas Carlyle. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. New Haven: Yale UP. 2013. Pp. 348. $20.00.

It is George Orwell's description of Charles Dickens, Carlyle's friend and disciple, that best serves as an epithet for the Carlyle presented by David Sorensen and Brent Kinser in their addition to Yale's *Rethinking the Western Tradition* Series. Carlyle is portrayed as someone who possesses "the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry* – in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls" (16). Presenting Carlyle as a non-partisan polemicist is perhaps not original but surely necessary if Carlyle is to be rescued from his self-inflicted cultural exile and made into a cultural mirror with which to rethink the western tradition. David Sorensen's introduction does an excellent job of reminding the reader of Carlyle's fall both during his lifetime, when Carlyle's authoritarian streak strained many of his friendships, and after, when "Joseph Goebbels cited Carlyle's *History of Frederick the Great* (1858–65) as Adolf Hitler's chief source of solace during his final months in the Berlin bunker" (2). At the same time, there is an underlying, though complex, sympathy with Carlyle throughout the essays – furthered by the long list of luminaries influenced by Carlyle's writing: "Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Gavan Duffy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Engels, [...] John Ruskin, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Oscar Wilde" (159). Sorensen's assurance that, after Goebbels' praise, "the 'Sage of Chelsea' [was never again] readily identified with the cause of common humanity" (2) implies that this identification, while more complex than Carlyle's early disciples might have felt, is not without foundation.

The book itself consists of two parts: an edition of Carlyle's six lectures, followed by seven essays that present the Carlylean hero while relating him either to Victorian or contemporary culture. The text for this edition of the lectures is the first edition, published by James Fraser in 1841, with typographical errors left intact and noted by [*sic*], and factual errors corrected

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.