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Creative, critical, intertextual: Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Abstract:

This article is something of an apologia for rereading Agatha Christie, whose work is all too often deemed lacking in creativity, or, at the very least, the richness of the literary, or non-genre-based, text. Judging by her autobiography, even the author herself, a lover of 'the classics', subscribed to some degree to this perception of her writing. Such perceptions, however, flow logically (or perhaps syllogistically) from ending-based responses to her work, according to which detective fiction (and especially the whodunit model within the bounds of which critics constrain her texts) has only one meaning, to wit, the solution to the crime as unveiled by the detective. Christie's works are nonetheless literary; they are texts, in other words, and indeed texts *in other words*. This textuality brims over and strains against the generic parameters that she is considered to have pioneered, but which have been set in stone by critics, those all-powerful readers. This article follows one line of flight beyond the bounds of the detectival solution. The marrow thrown by Hercule Poirot in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* will be shown to be a literary act *par excellence*, a sign of textual exuberance. Or perhaps not so much a sign (for all signs point to the solution, do they not?) as an explosion. I shall read the marrow for what it is – a marrow with a history; I shall try to go beyond the metaphorical in favour of the intertextual; and finally, rather than turning a blind eye to it in our pursuit of the murderer, I shall read it.

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Crime fiction – Barthes, Roland – Christie, Agatha – Dickens, Charles – Intertexuality

Introduction

When I recently tried to borrow a copy of *Murder on the Orient Express* from my university library I was surprised to discover that no copies of any novel by Agatha Christie were kept in the permanent collection. I asked a librarian whether she was as surprised as I that Agatha Christie was not better represented in the catalogue. I was informed that the library's clients did not have the time for 'leisure reading'. For the purposes of this special issue, this extraordinary comment constitutes an interesting segue into the debate on the value of reading, the notion of reading exclusively for education rather than also for enjoyment (see, for example: Forsyth and Quinn 2014, Franks 2015). Most obviously, this attitude to Christie's work – and, by extension, popular writing in general – is echoed in its academic reception. Phyllis Lassner, for example, notes that critics have long been 'hard pressed to find any depth or cultural value in her stable of stereotypical characters' (2009: 31). Not feeling convinced of the conservatism, and even less so the homophobia, that others find in Christie's writing, I remain unsure how this assessment of Christie should make me feel. To this extent my reaction can be described as being similar to that of James Sheppard when a large vegetable marrow, thrown from his neighbour's garden, nearly misses his head and lands, squelching, at his feet at the beginning of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*: anger at first, followed by a mixture of puzzlement and amusement.

On further reflection, it seems to me that the librarian's casual association of the reading of Agatha Christie with a leisure pursuit speaks volumes of a failure to engage actively, which is to say, to take seriously, novels whose literary value has failed to keep pace with their cultural importance (in terms of sales figures, literary influence and canon formation, and inspiration in terms of dramatic and filmic adaptation); indeed, it is arguably the fact that her novels are so familiar to so many of us that has led to our failure to read them, or at least to *re*read them. In the caricature of reading playfully offered by Roland Barthes (1973), literature is made up of those texts that have transparent meaning, whose words can be simply digested without any effort required on the reader's part; the literary therefore lends itself, precisely, to leisurely reading. The opposite of the literary in this schema includes reflexive, modernist texts, which require the reader's active input in order to achieve completion. While Barthes refers to the first texts as readerly (*le texte lisible*), he declares the latter writerly (*le texte scriptible*).

As hinted, this proves to be an ironic premise, which he rapidly inverts in order to elevate the readerly to the level of the writerly, a text whose meaning, in the wake of the famous death of the author, is virtual, always to be discovered anew and actualised, or produced, by each individual reading experience. This is more ironic yet in Christie's case, as the librarian's classification of her crime novels under 'leisure reading' seems to go against the grain of the motivation so commonly given by readers for picking up a whodunit, which is to pit their wits against the detective, to try to produce the plot in real time and in collaboration with the text. But, of course, what always happens is that the closing reveal, in which the murderer is exposed, either endorses or contradicts the conclusion that the reader had come to. Whether we get it right or wrong, we submit our readerly, or rather our *writerly*, ownership of meaning (what we thought the text was about) to the text and its univocal or

metaphysical meaning (what, in hindsight, everybody knows the text is about). In this way, we know that Dr James Sheppard is the murderer of Roger Ackroyd because Hercule Poirot says so. We can read the novel at our leisure; there is no rush; the truth is always there waiting for us.

Creative, critical, intertextual

So, why does Poirot throw a vegetable marrow into the Sheppards' garden, narrowly missing James Sheppard's head? This is a question that has always puzzled me and which the present Special Issue of *TEXT* has encouraged me to pursue a little further. I have previously suggested that this abusive treatment of the great English vegetable patch constitutes an act of subversion (see Rolls 2009: 47–51). Where the whodunit novel or short story, and crime fiction more generally, is understood to restore order, even to restore some kind of fabled, antediluvian peace to the everyday world, and to punish law-breaking, Poirot's act seems, on the contrary, to incite violence, to shatter the peace. In fact, at the start of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Poirot is himself suffering from the boredom of retirement, desperate for a murder to return him to the fray. In addition to closing down meaning and revealing truth, here Poirot picks out his chosen murderer from the outset, forcing him by weight of vegetable marrows to commit the deed so that he may be discovered. It even seems plausible that Poirot may be using his vegetable marrow like Robin Hood's last arrow, to choose a spot, in this case to elect a patsy for a murder of his own design. While the evidence of a thrown marrow is not sufficient to open up a case of murder against Poirot, its part in the story of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* may well merit closer scrutiny, for this is a weighty vegetable and certainly one not thrown lightly.

Along with squash, pumpkins and aubergines, marrows have a phallic shape; and, compared to the courgette, a fully grown vegetable is distinctly priapic. This has led authors to play on its erotic potential. In Boris Vian's *L'Écume des jours* (1947, translated into English variously as *Froth on the Daydream*, *The Foam of Days* and, in the case of Michel Gondry's 2013 film adaptation, *Mood Indigo*), Chick and Colin are served a plate of marrow by the latter's cook, seemingly in order to steel them in their attempts to find a mate. In this case, the term *une courge*, which is feminine in French, appears in the masculine (*un courge*) on their plates, presumably better to accompany the nuts with which it is served.[1] In the case of Poirot's throwing of the vegetable phallus, it might be conjectured that he is redeploying his murderous intent; it might equally be suggested that he is sharing his detectival or authorial relationship to the crime text. Hastings is no longer available to narrate his investigation, so there is a passing of the storytelling baton here: Poirot makes clear comparisons between Sheppard and Hastings as early as this first encounter. While it is difficult to establish just what type of seed is being sown, we may be considered justified in tracing the origins of this marrow-throwing in the context of the broader seeds of doubt sown in essays such as Pierre Bayard's famous alternative solution (1998). This work implicitly rejects claims that crime fiction might be considered leisure reading and simultaneously criticises the lack of academic attention paid to such texts. In this work Bayard emphatically outlines the value of writing and reading crime fiction as

well as the value of producing crime fiction criticism for both academic and popular audiences. Readers want to read the puzzle, but also those texts that unpack these puzzles. Thus, Bayard consolidates the idea that there is creativity in the construction of murder; there are, too, creative writing processes at play in those texts that interrogate these fictions.

Bayard's re-solution, which sees the doctor's sister, Caroline Sheppard, unveiled as the 'true' murderer, hinges in large part on an intertextual association of Caroline with Rudyard Kipling's mongoose Rikki-tikki-tavi, whose curiosity is matched only by its lethalness (1998, 160–161). Bayard exhibits here what Michel Riffaterre might have termed a compulsory reader response; in other words, the text, in this case *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, cannot be said to function fully without certain gaps being filled in by a missing text, or intertext, in this case Kipling's 'Rikki-tikki-tavi'. Only intertextually can Caroline's clearly signposted curiosity be reframed by the reader alongside her otherwise absent, and partially silenced, lethalness. What may strike the reader as disappointing in this intertextual trace is its overvaluation in the host text. For Riffaterre (1990), we are put onto the trace of an intertext when we discern an ungrammaticality in the text, by which he means that the text does not seem to make sense because something is missing. 'Rikki-tikki-tavi', however, is not absent from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*; it is not disavowed, or metaphorically substituted. Instead, the source of Caroline's mongoose-like nature is given specifically as Kipling's short story. At best, the intertext's grammatical function here is as a simile, a description. This, it could be argued, is a case of intertextuality as that famous crime fiction writing device: the red herring.

A more properly ungrammatical instance of intertextuality is the throwing of the vegetable marrow. Intertextuality of the type proposed by Riffaterre treads a fine line between a poststructuralist brand of reader response, predicated on the reader's reaction to the text alone, and something closer to authorial influence, for despite his concentration on the text, Riffaterre's use of terms like 'obligatory intertextuality' suggests that grammaticality, and thus univocity, can be restored once the (one true) intertext has been traced. Interestingly, Christie herself signals the intertextual trace of Poirot's otherwise inexplicable action in her autobiography: 'Our first Dickens was *Nicholas Nickelby*, and my favourite character was the old gentleman who courted Mrs Nickleby by throwing vegetable marrows over the wall' (1977: 147–148). As she continues, however, Christie, coyly perhaps, downplays the importance of this influential text in her construction of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Not only does she fail to mention that Poirot mimics the actions of Mrs Nickleby's suitor exactly, but she also posits herself as a reader of her text by denying authorial omniscience: 'Can this be one of the reasons why I made Hercule Poirot retire to grow vegetable marrows? Who can say? My favourite Dickens of all was *Bleak House*, and still is' (1977: 147–148). This final sentence poses its own enigma, as if there are clues to be found in this other Dickens novel.

At the beginning of *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), Poirot has no fear that the compartment reserved for a certain M. Harris will not remain empty because, as he states, he reads his Dickens (20). There are two obvious candidates for the role of a male Harris: there is a Mr Harris, nicknamed Short Toppers, owner of a travelling

puppet show in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which might suggest Poirot's role as puppeteer in his own travelling theatre; more convincingly, there is Mrs Harris, to whom a husband is at one point attributed, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who is famous as Mrs Gamp's imaginary friend.[2] The latter reference is suggestive because Mrs Harris (and *a fortiori* her husband) represents a *mise en abyme* of literary creativity, what Goldie Morgentaler refers to as 'a portrait of the artist as a character creating a character'; [3] but, more than that, she marks a moment of textual undecidability: whether or not Mrs Harris can be said to *exist* (she is a literary character *en abyme*, a creation of one of Dickens' creations, and in what the real life of a literary character might consist, is never resolved. In this sense, Dickens' interest in the figure of the double can be seen to reflect the foundational plurality of the text itself. In this light, Poirot's assertion that he reads his Dickens and therefore that he knows that Mr Harris will not arrive has two mutually opposed consequences: it establishes him as the master reader of text, whose individual actualisation of meaning equates to knowledge or the 'true meaning' of the text; at the same time, it undermines this same will to knowledge by virtue of the gender inversion on which his recollection, or conflation, of Dickensian characters is predicated. Poirot therefore both knows and does not know *at the same time*; like the Dickensian double (or that of Poe and other nineteenth-century writers), he is cloven, a personification of something akin to Derridean *différance*. For the purposes of the present reading, I shall limit my scope to an intertextual re-evaluation of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in the light of Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* in order to see to what extent the grammaticality of the former text, thus restored, coincides with the metaphysical reading of Christie's (or perhaps now Bayard's) solution.

Nicholas Nickleby is, above all, a tale of righteous comeuppances and the closing of circles; the unjust are punished and the just are paired off into loving couples, their future happiness vouchsafed. One story within the novel, however, is not granted closure: amid the happy marriages, one suitor succumbs to madness, breaches walls and retreats into oblivion. The gentleman whose courtship consists in throwing cucumbers and vegetable marrows makes two appearances in *Nicholas Nickleby*: above the garden wall in the house in Bow in chapter 41; and later, in chapter 49, when, this time dressed conspicuously in his small-clothes, he attempts to gain entry to the Nicklebys' home via their chimney and gets stuck. In the first encounter, the gentleman's appearance is preceded by a textual explosion (the simile used is of a fireworks display):

> A large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky-rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs. Nickelby's feet.
>
> This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come toppling down; then, several cucumbers shot up together; finally, the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering, and bumping about, in all directions ([1839]1971: 532–533).

What we have here is a dramatic breaching of liminal space, specifically a garden

wall, which operates intertextually to pierce the perimeter of Dickens' text and to open a portal into, in this case, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. This breaching of space is all the more dramatic in the case of the gentleman's second appearance because of his failure to pass through the chimney; the result is that he is left in suspension, his legs alone visible as he becomes the very embodiment of liminality, of crossing and resisting passage. In both cases, he is pulled by the legs from his liminal position: first, by 'a coarse squat man' ([1839]1971: 539), who claims him to be 'the cruellest, wickedest, out-and-outerest old flint that ever drawed breath'; second, by Frank Cheeryble, after which he exits (from the room but also from the novel) on the heels of his latest love interest, Miss La Creevy, but not before he has given his last explosive performance:

> 'Cat!' repeated the old gentleman. 'Puss, Kit, Tit, Grimalkin, Tabby, Brindle! Whoosh!' With which last sound, uttered in a hissing manner between his teeth, the old gentleman swung his arms violently round and round, and at the same time alternately advanced on Mrs Nickleby, and retreated from her, in that species of savage dance with which boys on market-days may be seen to frighten pigs, sheep, and other animals, when they give out obstinate indications of turning down a wrong street ([1839]1971: 649).

In addition to framing the explosion, of vegetables and subsequently of language, offered by his earlier appearance at the garden wall, the gentleman's retreat from the room also marks the simultaneous bidirectionality, or hesitation, of liminality, as he in turn advances on and retreats from Mrs Nickleby.

The first time we learn of his vegetable throwing, however, is when Mrs Nickleby waits up for Nicholas in order to inform him of it. It is this waiting up, on the part of the mother for her son, that is intertextually significant here, since it is translated onto *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in the form of Caroline Sheppard's consistent commentary on the time at which her brother James returns home: the novel opens with her noting that his morning call to a patient, Mrs Ferrars, who has been found dead, has left him late for his breakfast; later, she is curious as to why he has returned so early from his dinner with Ackroyd, after which we learn the latter has been murdered (11, 65). Caroline and Mrs Nickleby have in common the certainty of their own omniscience; while Mrs Nickleby's opinion is universally held in contempt, Caroline's ability to garner information that proves correct is considered uncanny. And yet, Mrs Nickleby is not always wrong: her understanding of Frank Cheeryble's feelings for her daughter Kate, for example, proves well-founded. And at the same time, Caroline's knowledge, while generally proven sound, is continually cast in doubt by her brother James.

In the midst of this complex intertextual translation, which sees events and relationships inverted and others conflated, numerous tropes from *Nicholas Nickleby* are grafted onto *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The most obvious of these is that of madness. The act of vegetable throwing that is common to the gentleman in the small-clothes and Poirot allows us to map the logorrhoea of the former's courtship onto the paranoid delirium diagnosed by Bayard in his re-solution of Ackroyd's murder. James Sheppard notes that Poirot seems 'strange' ([1926]2002: 33), but the latter dispels his fears to some degree by denying both that he is in the habit of throwing vegetable

marrows and that he is insane (33, 35). Furthermore, the seemingly random targets chosen for the gentleman's courtship can also enable us to question at whom Poirot is aiming when he throws his vegetable marrow into the Sheppards' garden. He elects James to stand in for his lamented Hastings; he later meets with Caroline and prevents her from attending the final reveal, for it is among those gathered that he will find the murderer ([1926]2002: 330); finally, he chooses James as his murderer, but confronts him in private and allows him, ostensibly in an act of mercy, to find his own way out of this predicament. By turn, Poirot appears to favour brother and then sister, as if his act of vegetable throwing is designed to capitalise on this initial hesitation, to let fate decide. Intertextually, though, the fact that his marrow alights on a man offers an inversion of Dickens' gentleman's courting. This inversion is taken up, albeit as the result of another intertextual trace, by Bayard, who unveils Caroline, not James, as the murderer within the story.

Bayard's alternative solution is predicated on fraternal love (Caroline kills to protect James and James commits suicide to protect Caroline). Interestingly, the domestic arrangements of the Sheppard household actualise contingency plans evinced by Nicholas for himself and his sister Kate, both of whom have seen their path to love impeded by adverse circumstances:

> [But] rich or poor, or old or young, we shall ever be the same to each other, and in that our comfort lies. What if we have but one home? It can never be a solitary one to you and me. What if we were to remain so true to these first impressions [his love for Madeline and Kate's love for Frank] as to form no others? It is but one more link to the strong chain that binds us together ([1839]1971: 795).

This plan for domestic compromise proves unnecessary in *Nicholas Nickleby* where the respective couples of lovers are restored to each other; it is, on the other hand, fully realised in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The love suggested by vegetable throwing, however, is altogether more sexual in nature. Whether Poirot is in love with either James or Caroline, or both, may be guessed at. Be that as it may, there are strong grounds for suspecting that James and Caroline's love surpasses the bounds of the fraternal, not least of which is the Shakespearean choice of veronal and the 'poetic justice' to which James refers at the end of the novel ([1926]2002: 368), which casts the pair as star-cross'd lovers. The Dickensian intertext also leads to some curious references to incest. The following anecdote precedes Arthur Gride's failed bid to marry Madeline Bray:

> There is [also] a legend of a young gentleman, who, not having before his eyes the fear of the canons of the church for such cases made and provided, conceived a passion for his grandmother. Both cases are of a singular and special kind, and it is very doubtful whether either can be considered as a precedent likely to be extensively followed by succeeding generations ([1839]1971: 709).

If Poirot's vegetable marrow is thrown into a garden that has already seen the purity of Nicholas and Kate's love morph into something more incestuous, the incident serves to introduce another figure whose importance can also be read through the lens of the same intertext. It transpires that Poirot wanted to find out the identity of 'the young man with the very dark hair and eyes, and the handsome face' (Christie

[1926]2002: 36). Again, either Caroline or James could have answered this question, as both know everyone in the village. Poirot's interest in the young man, to whom he refers later as a Greek God, pushes the bounds of neighbourly interest. His courtship may, in light of this, be better directed than first appears; certainly, the name of the young man in question comes straight from *Nicholas Nickleby*, for it is none other than Ralph. Ralph Nickleby, Nicholas' uncle, personifies evil in the novel and unrepentant to the end, commits suicide. Throughout *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Captain Ralph Paton is the obvious suspect. Indeed, Bayard dismisses him as the murderer on these precise grounds (1998: 148). Given the gender reversal of Poirot's vegetable-throwing courtship ceremony, it is possible to suggest a more dramatic reversal: the redemption, in another text, of Ralph Nickleby. An intertextual analysis of the two scenes in which the gentleman with the small-clothes is pulled down from liminal spaces suggests a reorientation of Dickens' use of prolepsis.

The gentleman is, as we have seen, considered mad and wicked. He twice climbs up (onto a wall and then into a chimney) only to be pulled down. Both scenes serve as proleptic visions of that other wicked man's death. Like the gentleman, Ralph Nickleby is pulled from below: his body is cut down by a group of men after he has hanged himself from 'an iron hook immediately below the trap-door in the ceiling' of his garret (Dickens [1839]1971: 807). While this is the most powerful of Dickens' narrative closures, the escape (from the text) of the gentleman in the small-clothes creates room for the retelling of Ralph's story. Arguably then, Christie's favourite character in *Nicholas Nickleby* ushers his more famous co-character into *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, at the same time creating intertextual space for Ralph's murderous desires to be fulfilled. When Arthur Gride, furious at not having been married to Madeline Bray, imagines his housekeeper 'lying with her brains knocked out by a poker', Ralph's reply lays down a challenge to the author of the whodunit: 'I tell you, I wish such things were more common than they are, and more easily done. You may stare and shiver. I do!' (Dickens [1839]1971: 737).

In order to enable textual desire for murder to be fulfilled in other texts, or intertextually, all the skill of the crime fiction writer is required. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is famous for the breaking of a key crime fiction principle; but, that aside, it produces multiple red herrings and adheres strictly to the rule according to which the obvious suspects are not the killer (in addition to Ralph Paton, the clichéd butler is also brought into play). Its use of intertextuality can be shown to function in a similar way. The obvious intertext, Kipling's 'Rikki-tikki-tavi', is *too* obvious insofar as its name is given in the text; in other words, to use Riffaterre's terminology, it is not, or not sufficiently, ungrammatical. It is common for Christie to purloin her key scenes, which is to say that she hides them in full view.[4] The various ways in which the suitably ungrammatical intertext, *Nicholas Nickleby*, is distorted and inverted in its deployment inside *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* are such that no one 'obligatory' rereading suggests itself; rather, multiple consequences emerge. Ralph (Paton, né Nickleby) can be reread as the obvious murderer, perhaps demonstrating a penchant on Christie's part for Dickens' would-be murderers; Caroline and James can be reread as being too close to each other, perversions of the Dickensian ideal of fraternal love; each or both can be considered the object of Poirot's courtship; even Poirot himself

may be deemed mad and wicked enough to be the murderer, his courtship an attempt to lay blame in other people's vegetable patches.

If Christie's works require some form of redemption, this does not necessarily require them to be read 'outside of the genre of detective or crime fiction', as Lassner implies; instead, creative critical readings can be shown to be compatible with crime fiction praxes (both critical and creative) (2009: 31). In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* a sophisticated model of intertextuality is deployed in parallel to *inter alia* clues and red herrings. In this way, 'Rikki-tikki-tavi' is grammatical within the body of the host text, which renders it, *at face value*, too obvious an intertextual suspect. Intertextually, its grammatical function is to allow the nonetheless dramatically staged, even overvalued, scene of vegetable throwing to pass by unnoticed. Similarly, the vegetable marrow scene itself plays a classic double bluff, drawing attention to itself in order to mask its 'true' significance: its grotesque shape and incongruous appearance in the text suggest enormous potential for metaphorisation, so much so that it is all too easy to neglect the importance of the marrow *qua* marrow, or in this case to fail to read its intertextual ungrammaticality, its presentation of itself as Other.[5]

Conclusion

Reading and rereading, writing crime fiction and writing critical re-interpretations of crime fiction offer much to the examination of creative practice. Through this practice we, as readers, are afforded opportunities to revisit cases and, as in a reflection of the role of the detective as a central figure across the numerous forms of crime fiction available, we, too, occupy the space of the investigator. In highlighting intertextual occurrences, we again take on the mantle of detective; we draw on experience that we take from other cases to expand our understandings and to solve a (textual) mystery.

In 1948 W.H. Auden raised the idea of the garden within crime fiction, noting that the scene of the crime 'should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder' (408). In the absence of murder, Poirot defaces the garden, hurling produce over the fence in an effort to instigate, rather than offer a contrast to, violence. The continuum presented with this simple vegetable plot, a humble patch of soil giving life to basic items at one end, and the notion of the great Garden of Eden, a vision of horticultural perfection, at the other, returns us to the debate of 'leisure reading' or 'educational reading'. This, too, is a continuum: extremes of a single type of activity. Yet both, gardening and reading, are, essentially, about the everyday – there might be extreme situations, be it committing murder or forcefully tossing vegetable marrows across garden walls – but literature is all about the human condition and teaching us how to deal with such extremes. Thus the marrow, a most ordinary vegetable, represents this ordinary-ness and the everyday while simultaneously suggesting a prelude to violence and so serves to (re)call the reader back to literature's main function, that is, to better understand the world around us. And in the case of crime fiction, so often dubbed the new Realism, the world that we are called on to understand is as often the textual, or the intertextual, as the graphically depicted world of our daily lives.

On a final intertextual note, the Dickensian lens lends some of its ungrammaticality to

'Rikki-tikki-tavi', whose intertextual mechanics can in turn be reread. The introduction, via Poirot's throwing of vegetable marrows, of the gentleman in the small-clothes into *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* brings with it a new focus on liminal spaces. On the first page of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* James Sheppard 'delay[s] for a few moments in the hall' (Christie [1926]2002: 9). This liminal hesitation is interesting in light of the mongoose family motto, which is, as is explicitly stated on the following page of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 'Run and find out'. When Rikki-tikki arrives at the house in his own story, however, his curiosity prompts him to '*stay* and find out' (Kipling [1894]1989: 118, emphasis added). Caught between running and staying, James hesitates and thus himself resembles Kipling's mongoose, which undermines Caroline's position, previously intertextually proven by Bayard (1998: 160–162), as sole possessor of that animal's propensity for murder. The textual multiplication produced by intertextuality and the impossibility of knowing at whom Poirot's vegetable marrow is aimed suggest grammatical hesitation at the level of the Sheppard couple, whose auto-differentiating singular-plural identity is always already cloven together *and* apart.

The use of ungrammaticality, or in this case a revision of punctuation, in order to reread text is offered in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839). While in Portsmouth, Nicholas is introduced to Mr and Mrs Curdle, local patrons of the arts:

> As to Mr. Curdle, he had written a pamphlet of sixty-four pages, post octavo, on the character of the Nurse's deceased husband in Romeo and Juliet, with an inquiry whether he really had been a 'merry man' in his lifetime, or whether it was merely his widow's affectionate partiality that induced her so to report him. He had likewise proved, that by altering the received mode of punctuation, any one of Shakespeare's plays could be made quite different, and the sense completely changed; it is needless to say, therefore, that he was a great critic, and a very profound and most original thinker ([1839]1971: 310).

Dickens' own reflexive (mis)placement of the comma in the sentence referring to altered pronunciation ('he had likewise proved, that … ') adds a witty touch to a powerful idea (which appears to anticipate, and presumably to mock, literary criticism of the poststructuralist variety). This suggestion of ungrammaticality as signifier of textual self-alterity breaks the narrative closure of *Nicholas Nickleby*, exploding it outwards with the disappearance of the gentleman in the small-clothes. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, it is Poirot's (range of) meaning that is completely changed: from restorer of peace and knower of singular truths, he morphs into thrower of fireworks in the vegetable patch and vector of widespread ungrammaticality.

Endnotes

1. Gilbert Pestureau and Michel Rybalka note that inspection of the original manuscript suggests this is not a typographical error (Vian 1994: 257).
2. Online conversations between Dickens enthusiasts indicate that the provenance of Mr Harris and the meaning of Poirot's reference to the unlikelihood of his arriving constitute an ongoing debate. See, for example, https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/CharlesDickens/conversations/topics/202 Accessed 10 June 2015

3. Goldie Morgentaler, 'Mrs. Gamp, Mrs. Harris and Mr. Dickens: Creativity and the Self Split in Two' *Dickens Quarterly*, 26. 1 (2009), 3–14: 3
4. A good example is the vision of the vicar's wife in a bikini that opens *The Body in the Library*, which is universally overlooked by critics (see Rolls 2015).
5. Other intertextual clues from *Nicholas Nickleby* for rereading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which I do not have sufficient room to develop here, include: Sir Mulberry Hawk's rearrangement of his room prior to Ralph Nickleby's entrance, which uncannily resembles the moving of furniture in Ackroyd's office (490); Madeline Bray's possible, and understated, role in the death of her father (718); and Ralph Nickleby's encounter with a passer-by, which recalls the stranger (perhaps Ralph Paton?) seen by James Sheppard as he is leaving Ackroyd's house on the night of the murder, and which also reminds Ralph of, and calls into question, a case of suicide in which he once acted as a juror (803).

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