

## *Introduction*

### *How to Play the Victorian Novel*

*How do we play the Victorian novel?* Such a verb might confound our ordinary sense of what to do or can be done with an object like the novel, and accordingly, what kind of object it is. Such a question also demands both description and instruction, a sociology and a how-to guide, implying motives both to know and to participate. If the obvious answer is that novels are read (or analysed, interrogated, unpacked), not played, ongoing debates in book history and of disciplinary methodology suggest ‘reading’ to be not so obvious a mode of relating. How to do it: closely or distantly, skimmed or in depth, materially or digitally, with sympathy or suspicion?<sup>1</sup> What is or ought to be the nature of our encounter with fiction? Sharon Marcus, Stephen Best, and Rita Felski have been the latest and most prominent critics to pose such questions as indicative of a present impasse in literary studies, raised by a growing dissatisfaction with established approaches.<sup>2</sup>

This book proposes an alternative mode of literary engagement to these multiplying forms of reading, a different way of doing the novel, which it recovers from a nineteenth-century practice into a critical method with distinct advantages. The authors and readers examined here recognised and exploited the form and history of the novel as an exceptional medium for artificial realities. The uses (or abuses) to which they put the text as vicarious experiences of power, fantasy, and presence compose an unorthodox tradition of literary knowledge and function which cannot be fully accommodated within existing critical approaches to the novel as an aesthetic, historical, material, or ethical object – even as recent scholarship on the phenomenology of reading suggests such experiences to be ubiquitous. Felski, for instance, has called on literary studies to ‘face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and [. . .] begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience’.<sup>3</sup> Elaine Auyoung has proposed ‘a form of critical attention distinct from the

pursuit of interpretive meaning, focusing instead on [...] the sensory and affective properties of the represented fictional world'.<sup>4</sup> Brigid Lowe has advocated for a style of criticism 'not of objective examination but of subjective participation' in literature.<sup>5</sup> More than a matter of acknowledging popular forms of reading, criticism is catching on to fictional experience as a new way to operate the literary object, eliciting other kinds of value than those of the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion.

I take up this experiential turn in criticism and call it *play* because examples and representations of how children and adults make-believe offer us (as they offered the Victorians) exemplary models for the often ineffable process of imaginative engagement with fictions. The chief advocates of this comparison are nineteenth-century novels and novelists themselves: Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* envisions that the heroes of his favourite novels 'came out, a glorious host, to keep me company', and enacts their adventures by wandering his house 'armed with the centre-piece out of an old set of boot-trees [...] in danger of being beset by savages'.<sup>6</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray concludes *Vanity Fair* with an image of children 'shut[ting] up the box and the puppets', putting away the narrative world and its characters now that 'our play is played out'.<sup>7</sup> Anthony Trollope doubts whether, had it not been for his adolescence escape into imaginative play, 'I should ever have written a novel. I learned in this way [...] to live in a world altogether outside the world of my own material life'. *Jane Eyre* walks back and forth along the corridors of Thornfield, acting out a version of Charlotte Brontë's own childhood habits by telling herself 'a tale my imagination created [...] with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence'.<sup>8</sup> Bordering daydream and fantasy, play embodies for these authors a practice of novel fiction as the experience of imagined worlds and objects, and more suggestively still, as a supplementary reality to life beyond the traditional ends (and endings) of the literary text.

Critics, philosophers, and narratologists have similarly found a useful heuristic in play for understanding how fiction affects or is experienced by readers. Critical practice may, as Eve Sedgwick put it, be constrained by 'the limitations of present theoretical vocabularies' for articulating such experiences.<sup>9</sup> But when George Henry Lewes seeks to explain the felt reality of Dickens's novels, the same sense of palpability which David uses for company and excitement, he is able to turn to an analogy of the child with 'a wooden horse', who imagines the spinning

of its 'wheels' as an experience of galloping.<sup>10</sup> In 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', Freud presents the usefulness of this comparison explicitly:

If we could at least discover [...] an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing! An examination of it would then give us a hope of obtaining the beginnings of an explanation of the creative work of writers. And, indeed, there is some prospect of this being possible. [...] Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?<sup>11</sup>

Twentieth-century critics therefore employ an intellectual tool first developed by nineteenth-century writers when they argue, as Peter Brooks argues, that realism can be seen 'as a kind of literature and art committed to a form of play that uses carefully wrought and detailed toys'.<sup>12</sup> Or as Kendall Walton and Thomas Pavel propose in their studies of mimesis, that 'just as children pretending to feed dolls [...] become themselves fictional moms and dads fictionally feeding their offspring, readers of *Anna Karenina* [...] participate (as spectators) in a game of make-believe'.<sup>13</sup> Imaginative play as an observable practice provides what is the perhaps the most visible model for examining the immersive aspect of literary fiction.

This book reconstructs a tradition of novel practice and criticism which has long been sidelined for its prioritisation of imaginative experience, and builds on this tradition in two ways. First, it endows the play-novel analogy with historical and technical specificity, by examining an actual, material play practice. At the turn between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the documented childhoods of the De Quincey brothers, the Brontë siblings, Hartley Coleridge, Anna Jameson, Thomas Malkin, and Trollope produced a phenomenon in the history of child psychology: the emergence of an unprecedented and highly specified type of make-believe, involving the elaborate construction of imaginary worlds. I investigate the mechanics of this imaginative practice, and trace its entanglements with the history of the novel, in order to better understand the novel's affordances and significance as a practice of fictional realities. Second, this book proposes how this understanding resituates the novel as an object in the history and culture of the virtual.

*How is the novel virtual?* Such a term draws deliberate associations with video gaming and cyber realities, domains where interactions with imaginary objects currently command widespread cultural and

theoretical attention; but as many art and literary historians have now argued, virtuality represents a philosophical concept that preceded and has helped to shape its modern digital connotations. Its seminal definition, adapted by Gilles Deleuze from Marcel Proust's famous description of sensuous memory, is that which is 'real but not actual, ideal but not abstract'.<sup>14</sup> That this philosophical definition originates from the novelistic account of a psychological event reflects the sense in which – as John Plotz has argued – the virtual constitutes a category of mediated sensory, social, or aesthetic experiences which crosses 'genre boundaries, historical periodization, and even disciplinary logic', even as its individual expressions in art and theory are generically, historically, or discipline specific.<sup>15</sup> On similar lines, Jean-Marie Schaeffer has argued that the three-dimensional other-world through which we imagine digital virtual realities is modelled after 'biological systems of representation' such as memory, as well as representational technologies in the visual and verbal arts.<sup>16</sup> Peter Otto has identified the formalisation of these examples into a concept of the virtual within Enlightenment and Romantic ideas about the second-order realities of the senses (Hume and Kant), of social fictions (Burke and Paine), and of poetic imagination (Coleridge and Wordsworth).<sup>17</sup>

The virtuality explored in this book shares some of these (as Plotz calls them) 'fuzzy borders', but represents a specific instantiation of the concept in the mid-Victorian novel: the virtual as *fictional experiences and actions, or fictional realities which can be experienced and acted upon*.<sup>18</sup> As I will argue in my chapter on Dickens, the inherent virtuality of human perception – the mediation of the world through our senses, and our susceptibility to seeing things that are not there – is central to Victorian debates about the psychology of fictional experience, a tradition which presages William Gibson's 1982 invention of the term 'cyberspace' as a 'consensual hallucination'.<sup>19</sup> Conversing with his characters beyond the novel and receiving letters of concern about them, Thackeray wondered whether, as 'Madmen, you know, see visions, hold conversations with, even draw the likeness of, people invisible to you and me [...] are novel-writers at all entitled to strait-waistcoats?'<sup>20</sup> Can a social encounter be real but not actual? The philosopher J. David Velleman identifies this capacity in the video game *Second Life*, where digital avatars perform meaningful actions on behalf of an actual player, and also in therapeutic play:

How can there be fictional actions that a real person literally performs? Here is another example. In the psychoanalytic transference, the patient may attempt to seduce the analyst, but not literally. Patient and analyst are rather embodying fictional versions of child and parent, and the attempt by the one to seduce the other is a fictional attempt at a fictional seduction. But the patient is really making that attempt, is really the agent of that unreal action. Actions carried out within the transference are not make-believe; *they are fictional actions literally performed.*<sup>21</sup>

To act or experience virtually in these senses is not, as in common parlance, to nearly do something ('I was virtually in tears') or to do it digitally ('I completed the forms virtually'), but to do it with vicarious or fictional reality: to taste the memory of food or seduce an imagined person. As Auyoung has argued, such effects 'are central to literary experience but remain on the periphery of literary studies [. . .] how the words of a novel can seem to evoke immediate sensory experiences and how fictional persons can continue to endure in a reader's mind'.<sup>22</sup> Understanding the novel as a historical medium for this capacity, and moreover as its exemplary literary form, reorients our sense of its literary functions while also recovering a Victorian legacy of ongoing questions about the relation between material and imagined lives.

*Why the novel?* Experiences of vicarious reality or immersive participation are not exclusive to the novel, nor often what novelists claim to be providing; yet it is a literary form whose inherent characteristics afford virtuality like no other. 'Affordance' is a psychological concept which has gained recent traction in literary studies, largely through the work of Terence Cave and Caroline Levine, as a way of thinking about genre: it signifies 'the potential *uses* an object or features of the environment offers to a living creature'.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, the qualities of an object can afford its use – lend it to being used – in ways that may be indifferent to its intended purpose. For example, a chair can (by virtue of its shape) be used as a coat rack or (by virtue of its rigidity) as a battering ram, as much as (by virtue of its design) for sitting in, and these affordances are particular in that it is better or less suited for some of these uses than other objects. If David's 'glorious host' is sustained 'out' of his reading of actual novels, in the sense of arising and then diverging from, the sense that the novel is especially effective for producing this kind of imaginative experience belies the generic particularity of novel fiction and its literary history.

One of the novel's technical innovations, as Catherine Gallagher and Lennard Davis have argued, was a new (but now almost universal) form

of fictionality which combined plausibility and specificity with nonreferentiality. That is, the early novel was distinctive for appearing to reference specific persons, places, or events in the reader's contemporary world while overtly denying any direct correspondences, in contrast to other genres which lacked either its pretended reality (such as the epic or the romance) or its accepted fictitiousness (such as news or libel). For both Gallagher and Davis, this development was the unintentional yet monumental side-effect of eighteenth-century legal pressures on the depictions of contemporaries, where the disingenuous claims of satirists to be engaging in 'an innocent alternative to libellous referential stories' created a genuine genre of 'believable stories that did not solicit belief [...] which could be enjoyed for their own sake without reference to [a] person satirised'.<sup>24</sup> With the realist novel's further emphasis on the recognisable, Elaine Freedgood has also suggested, this 'weird – although thoroughly naturalized – combination of fictionality and factuality [...] makes the nineteenth-century novel anomalous (and this form persists [...] in any novel that continues to be realistic and thus referential)'.<sup>25</sup> By this account, novel fiction invented as its special characteristic imaginary objects which, having the referential style and verisimilitude of actual instances, can be treated or taken in certain ways 'as-if' for real.

This distinctive capacity of the novel for purveying explicitly artificial realities – in other words, the novel's historical affordance for the virtual – has been obscured by two prevailing attitudes to literary representation which might be called, for our purposes, *the real as actual* and *the ideal as abstract*. In the former, inherited from Platonic suspicions of the copy and registered by recurrent anxieties about cultural consumption, literature's acknowledged persuasiveness at reproducing reality is understood as falsifying the actual. The popular contention of these arguments is that representations lead individuals to mistake fiction for life. This anxiety is embodied by cultural figures from Don Quixote to Madame Bovary to the video-game shooter, who allegedly model their behaviour in the actual world after the false standards of fictive realities, even to a certain model of the reader as interpellated subject who Davis presents as 'experiencing a fantasy not their own but which, in this autistic state, they believe in some provisional way to be true'.<sup>26</sup> Such a view, committed to a logical binary between actuality and deception, fails to accommodate the playful doubleness of a form that renders openly non-existent things with extravagant verisimilitude. Davis's own history of the novel as an

explicitly fictional form emphasises its distinction from simply persuasive deception: its capacity for 'ironic imagination' which Michael Saler has argued to be the foundation of virtual thinking, or as Lowe explains, simply its ability to not 'confound believing with imagining', to enjoy the quality of an illusion without being deceived.<sup>27</sup>

The second view, more influential and specific to the critical history of the novel, holds that represented realities express or typify general truths about actuality. As a defence of the novel's ethical or empirical truthfulness, versions of this argument extend back to Henry Fielding's claim to 'describe not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species', an adaptation of Aristotelian tradition that Gallagher and others enshrine as 'The founding claim of the [novel] form [...] a nonreferentiality that could be seen as a greater referentiality'.<sup>28</sup> A character's private life reflect the tendencies of a social class; the outcome of a tragedy embodies the conditions of living in the world; the luxuriant description of a manor house is 'no more than code for 'upper class' [...] an extremely roundabout way of making a very general and mediated statement about the way things are'; many students running these basic drills of literary training would recognise an inherent disappointment to the act of interpretation in its movement from the fictional towards the generalisable, universal, or abstract.<sup>29</sup> The referential specificity and immaterial details of the novel's fictional particulars appear to most readers as overdetermined (even wasteful) for making nebulous statements about 'species'.<sup>30</sup> The literary tourist's arrival at architectural exemplars and biographical inspirations only belies the desire, not for manor houses in general, but for Thornfield itself; it is not a class nor genus of the actual that Dickens's readers have in mind when they beseech him 'to spare the life of Nell in his story', or for Dickens himself on writing that character's death, that 'Nobody will miss her like I shall'.<sup>31</sup>

*What are the stakes of virtual play?* Distinguishing the novel's imagined objects from both the Platonic copy and the Aristotelian universal, as possessing a kind of experiential reality in their own right, enables criticism to perceive what such fictions afford by virtue of their artifice. William Macready, the Victorian actor who petitioned for Nell's life, knew her to be a non-material person whose plausibility and referential style enabled real knowledge and attachment in response to her imagined specificity, as opposed to a general groan for the condition of orphans in the world; but although he was uncommonly affected by the narrative's outcome, it was not equivalent to the death of an actual

contemporary. 'I dread to read it, but I must get it over', Macready resignedly wrote in his diary, 'I never have read printed words that gave me so much pain'.<sup>32</sup> Another reader was reported as having exclaimed at the page, 'Dickens [...] would *commit murder!* He killed my little Nell', his niece commenting in her account that 'anyone might have supposed she was a real living child in whose sad fate he was deeply interested'; but this supposition too is limited by the presumable fact (it would be a different kind of anecdote otherwise) that he did not then contact the police.<sup>33</sup> As Lesley Goodman argues, such 'indignant readers' possess a specific sense of the author's culpability as not equivalent to actual action but still 'something that authors *do to* their characters' through the explicitly imaginary medium of plot.<sup>34</sup> Seeing as there is much else that authors and readers might *do to* a virtual person they could or would not to an actual one, this special category of experience demands its own theorisation and analysis.

The novel's potential value as a fictional reality is distinct, fulfilling other needs and requiring other practices, from our more familiar sense of its functions as a literary work. There are different social and ethical standards to an author's killing of character than to the murder of a material person, on the one hand, and to a character's killing of characters, on the other – because vicarious acts and experiences bear different kinds of significance to actual ones. 'Reading' an alleged report or reflection on actual care or violence is again different from 'playing' and enacting care or violence towards concrete imaginary objects: to interpret Trollope's representation of Mrs Proudie is to analyse the text or its claims about the world; to kill her off in narrative, miss her dearly, and then (in Trollope's words) 'live much in company with her ghost' (*AA* 173) is to do something to her specifically. Lowe's work articulates this as a difference of approach between critical methods of objectivity or detachment and of 'Sympathetic understanding' or 'subjective participation', following in the tradition of Wayne C. Booth's desire to 'work my way into a narrative [...] begin to see as [a character] sees, to feel as she feels, to love what he loves'.<sup>35</sup> This project differs from theirs, as play from sympathy, by expanding from a feeling understanding of perspective as only one (and perhaps least troubling) of many possible types of vicarious participation; I argue that the experience of a novel's fictional reality affords a wider range of responses and uses.

Just as Dickens's readers felt him to be 'literally perform[ing] fictional actions' (on analogously real, non-actual persons) through plot, Dickens himself recurrently imagined the vicarious satisfaction and moral



difference of violence on representational objects.<sup>36</sup> In the second report of the 1838 *Mudfog Papers*, Dickens's fictional association proposes a system of 'harmless and wholesome relaxation for the young gentlemen of England', involving the construction of ten square miles of artificial country with replica 'highway roads, turnpikes, bridges, miniature villages'.<sup>37</sup> Within this space, which has the appearance of the public world but is in fact 'inclosed, and carefully screened', inebriated viscounts could dress how they please, 'walking about without any costume at all, if they liked that better', destroy any of the easily rebuildable props, and behave freely with a population of 'automaton figures [. . .] a policeman, cab-driver, or old woman' who could be 'set upon and beaten by six or eight noblemen [. . .] utter divers groans, mingled with entreaties for mercy, [and] thus rendering the illusion complete, and the enjoyment perfect'.<sup>38</sup> If the social critique of this sketch is the association's inverted priorities – accommodating, rather than reforming, a social class which already treats the world as their playground – its detailed fantasy also acknowledges an 'enjoyment' in the world reproduced as toy, in an expendable semblance of reality. Dickens would later reiterate this idea, without the satirical voice, in response to less realistic figures than the automaton:

In my opinion the Street Punch is one of those extravagant reliefs from the realities of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and instructive. I regard it as quite harmless in its influence, and as an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any course of action, or a model for any kind of conduct. It is possible, I think, that one secret source of the pleasure [. . .] is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstance that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about, without pain or suffering.<sup>39</sup>

Such examples of secret pleasure may represent the antithesis of what Dickens and most Victorian novelists explicitly claimed as the novel's function – 'IT IS TRUE', Dickens fumed about the violent death of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, which he used as an example to incentivise public philanthropy – but at the same time, they exemplify the inherent implications of the novel's design. Much like Fielding's founding claim, 'moral and instructive' defences of the form do not diminish its givenness to other uses. If the pleasure of the puppet theatre depends simultaneously on its 'extravagant reliefs' from life and its 'likenesses', just as the enjoyment of beating an automaton is its harmless resemblance of harm, the logical structure of novel fiction epitomises this combination.

By creating a screened and enclosed world which stylistically resembles the actual, and can be treated and experienced in selective, advantageous respects like actual instances, the novel by virtue of its *fiction* may perform social and ethical functions which work with or against its goals as a *depiction* of society and ethics. As I have suggested, the work of Booth, Lowe, and Rae Greiner converge on sympathy as one of these functions, 'bind[ing] the reading of fiction to the task of endowing others, and the historical past, with virtual life'.<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Farina proposes epistemology as another, pointing out the uses of counterfactual analogies in Victorian literature and science as a 'combination of imaginative, sympathetic speculation *and* disavowal of speculation', coming to a new hypothetical knowledge of the actual by positing explicitly fictional circumstances 'as-if for real'.<sup>41</sup> For Freedgood, the vicarious fantasies intrinsic to the robinsonade provide another means of imperial domination, separate to its valorised representations of empire, by imagining the fictional colony as a virtual place which can be actualised through colonisation yet also one in which the unsavoury nature of that colonisation can be dismissed as fictional.<sup>42</sup> These recent approaches to nineteenth-century virtuality demonstrate an interpretive method which 'reads' not for a novel's symbolic meaning or historical representations, but for the implications of its vicarious enactments and relations, the advantages and uses available only because of its distinctive fictionality; as Nicholas Dames has argued, such studies engage 'the challenge of exploring the unique specificities of fictional, or virtual, experiences'.<sup>43</sup> *Virtual Play* is committed to that challenge as a pertinent enquiry into our past and present lives with fiction.

### Chapter Overview

The first chapter, 'Virtual, Paracosmic, Fictional', establishes virtual play as a historical practice, and draws its parallel with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments in novel fictionality. It introduces the concept of *paracosmic play* or *worldplay* – a form of modern make-believe documented in the juvenilia and biographical archives of Thomas De Quincey, Anna Jameson, Hartley Coleridge, Thomas Malkin, Brontë, and Trollope – as the clearest manifestation of this practice. I review the social scientific work on this phenomenon, track its origins through the history of utopian fiction, and propose its formal significance and theoretical affinities to the nineteenth-century novel. This chapter frames and contextualises the

historical argument of the book: that novel fiction comes of age by distinguishing the actual from the virtual.

This unorthodox history of the form prepares the ground for the four bipartite author studies that follow. The first part of each begins with a critical encounter, between an author and an ambivalent critic, which elucidates an obscured or disparaged facet of their fiction. I then explain and re-evaluate through their potential, alternative value as functions of virtual play. These sections re-examine an aspect of the novel (authorship, plot, form, and description) through comparison to a component of worldplay (omnipotence, improvisation, emotional attachment, and sensory imagination), to form the basis of a new critical perspective. The second part of each chapter puts this perspective to work on the close reading of an exemplary text, demonstrating the practical interventions and interpretive possibilities of a more vicarious novel criticism.

The second chapter examines recurring instances in the Brontë juvenilia where the siblings intervene in their narratives as omnipotent author-gods, called the 'Chief Genii', who reshape the imaginary world by writing it. I trace this narrative and play practice back to its roots in the pseudo-Oriental tales of *The Arabian Nights* and James Ridley, but also argue for its wider significance to the literary-theoretical metaphor (employed by writers from Gustave Flaubert to Roland Barthes) of the author as divine creator of the narrative reality. In counterpoint to existing scholarship which tend to emphasise generic differences between the juvenilia and Charlotte Brontë's mature work, I offer a reading of *The Professor* as a continuation of the Genii authorship within the realist novel, and thereby defend Brontë's reputation as an author of vicarious 'wish-fulfilment'. Brontë provides a starting case for this book's larger argument about the alternative uses of the novel as a fictional reality, rather than a historical representation, an aesthetic work, or an ethical parable.

The third chapter develops this argument by examining two claims of Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography*: that his novel-writing developed out of a paracosmic play practice he called 'castle-building', and that he made up his novel plots as he wrote them. Through an analysis of his and the De Quinceys' games, I point out how the improvisational nature of play – the virtual world is 'filled in' and revised over time with little premeditation – as an obvious analogue to Trollope's construction of the fictional Barseshire, and to his plotting of individual novels. I argue that the characters of *The Small House at Allington* behave improvisationally,

inventing, revising, and ‘filling in’ their personhoods as they go along, offering an alternative reading of the moral logic and psychology in Trollope’s realism. For Trollope, the novel is distinctive for providing this experience of fictional living, not as ‘mere’ escapism but as it contributes concretely to the reader’s experience of their own world.

The fourth chapter compares the longevity of imaginary worlds such as Brontë’s *Angria* and De Quincey’s *Gombroon* to Thackeray’s obsessive revisiting of a single novelistic setting over multiple works. For instance, the protagonists of *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Phillip* are all alumni of a fictional Grey Friars School which connects an expanding network of characters from across his oeuvre. Through his critical writing, I show how Thackeray was concerned about the affective pull of a familiar, imaginary place on the attention of his ever-baggier serial novels; a problem I argue he explores in *The Newcomes*, a novel about past relationships into which the characters of previous novels repeatedly intrude. Thackeray’s story about these affective entanglements suggests not only a reassessment of his uses of form, but also the conflicting uses of the novel in general, torn between its status as a literary work and as the medium for a fictional reality.

The fifth and final chapter addresses the concreteness of fictional experiences on which Brontë’s, Trollope’s, and Thackeray’s various uses of the novel depend. I examine nineteenth-century medical responses to Coleridge’s paracosmic play, in particular their cautions against imagined environments as precursors to hallucination, and the continuity of this discourse with more general anxieties about fictional or poetic experience; for instance, George Henry Lewes singled out Dickens as an author who shared his pseudo-hallucinations through novels. This view of novel-reading as imaginative sensory participation has since been overshadowed by the cinematic and the digital, but represents an important precedent for the everyday presence of non-material things and spaces. In a reading of *Little Dorrit*, where multiple characters form their unrealised hopes and plans into fantasised environments, I argue that play, hallucination, and fiction provided nineteenth-century critics with tools to conceptualise a phenomenology of the virtual, or even its reparative value.

This book is a project to distinguish the virtuality of the Victorian novel, both in the sense of differentiating a quality from other literary values or cultural functions, and of making a case for its significance to our understanding and use of the form. The novel’s development in the eighteenth century uniquely equipped it to produce detailed, plausible,

and palpable accounts of explicitly non-existent events, objects, places, and people, a capacity which has too often been subordinated to aims of 'reflecting' condition or generalities. This unprecedented practice of particularising the imaginary needs reassessment, on its own grounds, as a practice of the virtual, of making its own realities that can be experienced and interacted with through the medium of the text. What do novels distinctively do by virtue of their fictional worlds? What kinds of literal action do they vicariously afford? At stake in such questions is both a descriptive and instructive knowledge of the novel; understanding what kind of object it is and how it can help us to live imaginatively.