In this essay I try to address the issue of Dickens’s comedy in the theoretical context of ideas about fragmentation and hybridity raised in the writings of Bakhtin and Lacan. This was not undertaken in any particularly systematic analytical manner: on the contrary, I first chose a number of different passages from Dickens that I had long thought among his funniest, and tried to see what comic principles they might share. Ideas and images from Lacan and Bakhtin came to my mind as I began to think I detected a degree of methodological consistency in these disparate comic scenes. I am aware that these rather meandering explorations cross with the work of other critics, whose ideas I have found particularly stimulating.¹

In his 1949 essay, “The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I” Lacan speaks of the “fragmented body-image” as an experience which “regularly manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual”. It appears in the form of disjointed limbs, organs growing wings, and generally the monstrous bodily fantasies familiar from the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch. The formation of the “I”, on the other hand, “is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium – its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the haughty and remote inner castle”. The nightmare imagery of the fragmented body visualises the grotesque hybridity of the self which may precede or underlie the constitution of the I as a coherent, totalised, bounded entity.

In what seems to me a politicised and altogether more positively valued version of Lacan’s body imagery, Bakhtin, in his seminal study *Rabelais and his World*, famously anatomises the grotesque body.

obscenely disproportionate and uncontrollably abundant, always in movement, always outgrowing its own self, never completed:

It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. That is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable (1984: 19).

Bakhtin’s concept of the excessive body is associated with the people. It has no boundaries: it is always growing, never complete, shapeless and bulging, and always immeasurable The antithesis he posits is the bourgeois ego. This I am taking as analogous to Lacan’s fortress image of the “I”, representing containment, determinacy, restriction, exclusivity. In a slightly later passage, Bakhtin almost repeats the formulation I have just quoted:

The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic “economic man”, but to the collective ancestral body of all the people (1984: 19).

The Lacanian fragmented body and the Bakhtinian body of the people have certain features in common, in terms of aggressively grotesque disproportion: but they are given different values. Lacanian fragmentation and hybridity is construed as a negative, a nightmare; whereas Bakhtin’s grotesque body is construed as the image of a rich popular-cultural vitality. When we consider manifestations of these principles of disintegration and deformity in Dickens, we find that they too are ambivalently valued: fragmentation and hybridity and grotesque abundance are viewed in Dickens both positively and negatively.

I want to explore some aspects of Dickens’s comedy in the light of these principles of the controlled fortress self vs indeterminate abundance, and would like to begin with some examples of linguistic comedy. In the idiosyncratic speech styles Dickens deploys we very often have something like a linguistic analogy to the kind of antithetical relations imaged by Lacan and Bakhtin. That is to say, fragmentation and hybridity, unconstrained fantastic growth, in speech terms, are set in relief from and destabilise coherence, uniformity, orthodoxy and controlled development. The friction between the two – between the disruptive energy of uncontrollable superfluity and a buttoned-up, “fortress” orderliness – is a chief source of Dickens’s comedy.
First, I take two scenes from *Pickwick Papers*. The dramatic comedy in *Pickwick* begins with the arrival on the scene of Jingle. It is in the confrontation of Jingle with Pickwick that, for me, the book comes comically alive, in the friction generated between two principles: Pickwickian propriety and prosy literalness, and Jingle’s racy eloquence and versatility. Here’s an example:

> “Head, heads – take care of your heads!” cried the loquacious stranger, as they came out under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to the coach-yard. “Terrible place – dangerous work – other day – five children – mother – tall lady, eating sandwiches – forgot the arch – crash – knock – children look round – mother’s head off – sandwich in her hand – no mouth to put it in – head of a family off – shocking, shocking! Looking at Whitehall, sir? – fine place – little window – somebody else’s head off there, eh, sir? – he didn’t keep a sharp look-out enough either – eh, sir, eh?”
> “I am ruminating,” said Mr. Pickwick, “on the strange mutability of human affairs.”
> “Ah! I see – in at the palace door one day, out at the window the next. Philosopher, sir?”
> “An observer of human nature, sir,” said Mr. Pickwick.
> “Ah, so am I. Most people are when they’ve little to do and less to get” (*Pickwick Papers*: 14).

Jingle’s speech is wonderfully dis-jointed, fragmented, grotesque in its exaggeration, endlessly prolific: it is hard to distinguish excrescence from fundamental form. Pickwick’s speech is standard educated, abstract, Latinate, syntactically coherent: it is fortress English, with its carefully measured boundaries. You know what a Pickwickian sentence is: it has a beginning and an end; it is hierarchically structured with principal and subordinate clauses. It holds itself together. It is as ordered and prim and pedantic as Pickwick himself in the early stages of the book. It would be flattering to call Jingle’s speech paratactic: it is described as “A lengthened string of […] broken sentences”, and, ironically, “this coherent speech”. Jingle’s speech is a linguistic variation on the fragmented body image. It is *dis-jointed*. It never stops long enough to settle into a coherent shape.

But then nor does Jingle himself keep his own identity constant for long: he is everything to everybody. He is the actor, whose capacity to change shape is his living. As such, as a polymorphous principle expressed in the dizzying energy and adaptability of his language, Jingle is demonised by the Pickwickians who recognise that he constitutes a threat. He is the agile free spirit, until finally he succumbs to imprisonment by the official world which he has long eluded and
parodied. He becomes a dependent on Pickwick rather than his antagonist, and the comic energy in their relationship evaporates.

In the next example, official discourse is absent in the sense that no character like Pickwick is present in the scene to throw into relief more anarchic forms of language. But it is implied and aspired to, and therein lies the comedy. It is the scene where Sam Weller, with his father’s help, is trying to compose a Valentine letter.

“Go on, Sammy.”
“‘Lovely creetur,’” repeated Sam.
“Tain’t in poetry, is it?” interposed his father.
“No, no,” replied Sam.
“Werry glad to hear it,” said Mr Weller. “Poetry’s unnat’ral; no man ever talked poetry ‘cept a beadle on boxin’ day, or Warren’s blackin’, or Rowland’s oil, or some o’ them low fellows; never you let yourself down to talk poetry, my boy. Begin agin, Sammy.” […]

“‘Lovely creetur I feel myself a damned’—
“That ain’t proper,” said Mr Weller, taking his pipe from his mouth.
“No, it ain’t dammed,”’ observed Sam, holding the letter up to the light, it’s “shamed,” there’s a blot there […]. Feel myself ashamed, and completely cir – “I forgot what this here word is,” said Sam, scratching his head with the pen, in vain attempts to remember.

“Why don’t you look at it, then?” inquired Mr Weller.
“So I am a lookin’ at it,” replied Sam, “but there’s another blot. Here’s a ‘c,’ and a ‘l,’ and a ‘d.’”

“Circumwented, p’haps,” suggested Mr Weller.
“No, it ain’t that,” said Sam, “circumscribed; that’s it.”

“That ain’t as good a word as circumwented, Sammy,” said Mr Weller, gravely.

“Think not?” said Sam.
“Nothin’ like it,” replied his father.
“But don’t you think it means more?” inquired Sam.

“Vell p’raps it is a more tenderer word,” said Mr Weller, after a few moments’ reflection. “Go on, Sammy.”

“Feel myself ashamed and completely circumscribed in a dressin’ of you, for you are a nice gal and nothin’ but it.”

“That’s a werry pretty sentiment,” […] Wot I like in that ‘ere style of writin,’” said the elder Mr Weller, “is, that there ain’t no callin’ names in it, – no Wenuses, nor nothin’ o’ that kind. Wot’s the good o’ callin’ a young o’man a Venus or a angel, Sammy? […] You might jist as well call her a griffin, or a unicorn, or a king’s arms at once, which is werry well known to be a collection o’ fabulous animals, […] Drive on, Sammy,” said Mr Weller […]

“Afore I see you, I thought all women was alike.”

“So they are.”

“But now,” continued Sam, “now I find what a reg’lar soft-headed, inkred’lous turnip I must ha’been; for there ain’t nobody like you, though I like you better than nothin’ at all.” I thought it best to make that rayther strong, […] “So I take the privilidge of the day, Mary, my dear – as the gen’l’m’n in difficulties did, ven he walked out of a Sunday, to tell you that the first and the only time I see you, your likeness was took on my hart in much quicker time and brighter colours than ever a likeness was took by the profeel macheen (wich p’raps you may have heerd on Mary my dear) altho it
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does finish a portrait and put the frame and glass on complete, with a hook at the end to hang it up by, and all in two minutes and a quarter.” (Pickwick Papers: 443-445).

The exchange between the two Wellers enforces a solidarity between them, despite the son’s rather greater sophistication with language. This is a lesson in penmanship and prose style and involves a comic ridiculing of high-flown formality and courtesy, to which the Wellers nonetheless aspire. It is linguistically upwardly aspiring, an effort to lift the vernacular into the educated-polite and to give it formal respectability. (‘I never knewed a respectable coachman as wrote poetry….” “Damned” ain’t proper.) ‘Circumscribed’ and “circumwented” are polysyllabic, educated gestures: an awesome linguistic currency that has uncertain value for the Wellers, but sounds weighty and rich and respectable.

The scene depends on a series of comically unsuccessful efforts to discipline the grotesque body in linguistic terms. Correct grammar and orthography, and a physically elegant manuscript, may be aspired to, but the contrary anarchic impulses keep pulling against it. Thus the Profile machine simile runs beyond control. It swells out of proportion – way beyond the strictly referential function of the analogy. It obeys impulse that Dickens himself cannot resist. The final manuscript of the letter is a comically deformed text, materially and linguistically: spattered with ink blots, syntactically contorted, as joyously prolific in its waywardness as Sam’s idiosyncratic speech itself.

We may consider one more instance of the linguistic version of comically collapsing coherence and uncontrollable superfluity. This is not so much a matter of working class semi-literacy, as with the Wellers, as of middle-class controls losing their grip. So it is not the comedy of transgression against orthography or standard syntax or pronunciation.

“I think there must be something in the place,” said Mrs Nickleby, who had been listening in silence; “for, soon after I was married, I went to Stratford with poor dear Mr Nickleby, in a post-chaise from Birmingham – was it a post-chaise though!” said Mrs Nickleby, considering; “yes, it must have been a post-chaise, because I recollect remarking at the time that the driver had a green shade over his left eye; in a post-chaise from Birmingham, and after we had seen Shakespeare’s tomb and birth-place, we went back to the inn there, where we slept that night, and I recollect that all night long I dreamt of nothing but a black gentleman, at full length, in plaster-of-Paris, with a lay down collar tied with two tassels, leaning against a post and thinking; and when I woke in the morning and described him to Mr Nickleby, he said it was Shakespeare just as he had been when he was alive, which was very curious indeed. Stratford – Stratford,” continued Mrs Nickleby, considering. “Yes, I am positive about that, because I recollect I was in the family way with my son Nicholas at the time, and I had been very much frightened by an Italian image boy that very morning. In fact, it was...
quite a mercy, ma’am,” added Mrs Nickleby, in a whisper to Mrs Wititterly, “that my son didn’t turn out to be a Shakespeare, and what a dreadful thing that would have been!” (Nicholas Nickleby: 431).

Her speech is unedited, random association, hopelessly sprawling and undirected, circling around on itself, never settling into any coherent shape. It suppresses nothing. It hierarchises nothing. It just keeps growing in unstructured ways: it is Jingle’s speech without the extravagant, anecdotal plot-line. It is, significantly, partly reported dream, where incoherence is licensed and where we might expect grotesque fragmentation and hybridity. But what is funny in Mrs Nickleby’s speech is that there’s no difference between dream fantasy-association and waking fantasy-association, as she shows when she refers to her imminent son and the association with an Italian image boy. The image boy, Shakespeare and the embryonic Nicholas – the living and the dead and the unborn – live in a state of fluid exchange in the surreal world of Mrs. Nickleby’s mind. Her inability to separate delusion from reality makes her susceptible to the imbecile courtship of the gentleman in small-clothes, who keeps lobbing vegetables over the garden wall in order to win her heart. This is grotesque parody of the serious romances already developing in the novel. It is comically subversive of the orderly and idealised procedures of courtship just as Mrs Nickleby’s disoriented mental processes are subversive of the orderly patterns of intelligent thought and communication.

In each of these instances, what helps to provoke laughter is the juxtaposition of order and near anarchy – an anarchy that exposes the fragility of the order that is challenged. Jingle connives with his author to expose the foolishness of the naïve pedant that is Pickwick. The Wellers play with polite discourse as if it were partly a foreign language and expose the absurdity of some of its conventional formalities. We laugh at Mrs Nickleby at the same time as we realise that she exposes, in quite the wrong public situation, exaggeratedly deformed processes of thought association that we might all admit to in private.

The shock of invasion of the inchoate and the uncontrollably protean, of vivacious deformity, of incompleteness as a permanent condition, whether it be in terms of Lacanian self-identity or of the Bakhtinian bodily principle, is, I think, one of the great sources of comedy in Dickens.

I want to continue to explore these issues in three rather broader contexts – and not always comic contexts – by looking at episodes from David Copperfield, Our Mutual Friend and A Christmas Carol.

Just before examining the passage from Copperfield, I want to make a few general points about the child in relation to what I have been
discussing. The child can be seen as a focal figure in Lacanian and Bakhtinian thinking about these issues of fragmentation, incoherence and the material bodily principle. It is the child after all who is said to experience the mirror stage and those accompanying anxieties about the constitution of the coherent self which can later manifest themselves in dreams of the fragmented body image. It is the child, in the Bakhtinian context, who has that curiosity and delight in bodily life that knows no shame about its basic functions of ingestion and excretion.

Bakhtin associates the material bodily principle with the aesthetic concept of grotesque realism in opposition to that of high abstract idealism. Grotesque realism and the comedy it generates emerge from folk culture, earthy carnivalesque celebrations: “Laughter degrades and materialises”; seriousness elevates and spiritualises. I repeat the statement of Bakhtinian principles quoted near the start of this essay:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character, this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualised. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. That is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable (1984: 19).

Applying this to the child, we could suggest that the child represents the stage before this severing of the self from the “material and bodily roots”. With these ideas in mind, let us turn to young David Copperfield.

We cannot of course talk about the Rabelaisian elements in David Copperfield: the celebrations of bodily functions such as excretion and sexual play were driven underground into the Victorian pornographic market. But David’s earliest memories do in some ways offer illustrations of the material bodily principle, or more precisely of the beginnings of the severance of the child from that principle:

The first objects that assume a distinct presence before me, as I look far back, into the blank of my infancy, are my mother with her pretty hair and youthful shape, and Peggotty, with no shape at all, and eyes so dark that they seem to darken their whole neighbourhood in her face, and cheeks and arms so hard and red that I wondered the birds didn’t peck her in preference to apples (David Copperfield: 14).
The differences in the way these two key figures in David's life are perceived correspond to the antithetical patterns already outlined and explored elsewhere in this paper. The mother has a shape, is distinctly realised as a determinate entity. The visual contours separating mother from non-mother, mother from the environment in which she exists, are already in place. The description is complimentary and distinctly meagre – “pretty hair”, “youthful shape”.

Peggotty, on the other hand, has a sublime indeterminacy. She has “no shape at all”. Remember those Bakhtinian phrases on the material bodily principle: “grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable”, “brimming-over abundance”. This is the immanent life principle. “No shape at all”. What we’ve got, through the child’s perception, is an assemblage of body parts: extraordinary dark eyes, hard, red cheeks and arms, a roughened forefinger. From these constituent pieces the child will eventually form another, coherent figure, with discernible contours. The mother is perceived in terms of (to use Bakhtin’s phrases) the “isolated biological individual”, the “bourgeois ego”. But Peggotty, even after she has for David settled into a determinate individual, continues to defy attempts to contain or restrict her incipient shapelessness (like Jingle’s speeches, like the Weller valentine). Remember how often her buttons burst off her when she joyfully embraces those she loves. She is the folk principle, the body of the people, and just when she reunites herself with that folk principle, shape-constraining buttons explode in all directions. Think of her opposite, the buttoned-up man who stays buttoned up:

Mr. Tite Barnacle was a buttoned-up man, and consequently a weighty one. All buttoned-up men are weighty. All buttoned-up men are believed in. Whether or no the reserved and never-exercised power of unbuttoning, fascinates mankind; whether or no wisdom is supposed to condense and augment when buttoned up, and to evaporate when unbuttoned; it is certain that the man to whom importance is accorded is the buttoned-up man (Little Dorrit: 621).

What happens to Peggotty? As the folk-rooted, material bodily principle, she is driven from the bourgeois parlour, way off to the kitchen. She’s separated from David’s mother, with whom she has had an intensely close, almost symbiotic relationship – both are called Clara, and both, together, constituted the full, nurturing maternal support for David. Murdstone scorns what he calls David’s “attachment to low and common company”. And from then on David is systematically weaned from the bodily principle, as represented in Peggotty. Low life, in the form of Peggotty, is seen to obstruct the
serious process of constituting the bourgeois ego and is relegated to a
harmless comic role. And of course it would obstruct such a process,
since it is a principle of undiscriminating inclusiveness, of earthy
candour, of free spontaneous growth and abundance. The training of
David into a bourgeois gentleman is a process of isolating him from
this principle in all its manifestations. David at the end of the novel is,
in Lacanian terms, the fortress or stadium. Surrounding him – but at a
safe distance – in his hard-won, bourgeois, domestic fortress at the end
of the novel are the novel’s versions of those marshes and rubbish-tips
– the foul, dark riverside where Martha nearly ended her life.

Bourgeois realism isolates, separates and distinguishes: it purports
to analyse relationships and relate people to environment: it can shape
a coherent chronological narrative. Its debased version is perfectly
exemplified in what Mr Podsnap prescribes as the proper nature of
Literature: “large print, respectfully descriptive of getting up at eight,
shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at
ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven [...]. Nothing
else to be permitted to those same vagrants the Arts” (Our Mutual
Friend: 174). David, as he grows up, learns to master that realism, to
understand the way people relate to each other and how he relates to
them. But as a child, he cannot yet manage this: “I could observe, in
little pieces, as it were; but as to making a net of these pieces, and
catching anybody in it, that was, as yet, beyond me”. The child
intellectually moves in the same element as that associated with the
material bodily principle. Without any sense of his own co-ordination,
or any comprehension of the relation of parts of himself to a total self-
identity, he sees himself and others fragmentarily, in little pieces. This
is regarded by the Murdstonian culture as a deficiency. Instead it might
be regarded as vitally enabling to the extent that it does not cut him off
from others. Prior to the fortress self, the child and his environment,
human and material, are composed of miscellaneous fragments, held
as it were in common ownership in a kind of fluid element. Simile and
metaphor, in this context, are symptoms of a recall of this primitive
state of existence in which affinities between unlike things – cheeks,
apples, fingertips, graters – were spontaneous and natural, not rhetorical
contrivances. They express a oneness and comically undermine realist
conventions.

The next passage in this exploration comes from Our Mutual Friend, a
novel which, like David Copperfield, is preoccupied with the constitution
and dissolution of identity. In one particular scene this preoccupation
is explored in grotesquely material terms and offers the reader
wonderfully comic versions of and debates on the nightmare of the
fragmented body image. It is an instance of Bakhtin’s principle,
“Laughter degrades and materialises”. The scene involves Mr Wegg and Mr Venus. Wegg has secured his new position as comfortably ensconced reader to Mr and Mrs Boffin, and now sees his way ahead to great social gentility. However, he feels strongly that his social progress towards gentility will be impeded by the fact that he has a wooden leg rather than his own leg. So he heads for Mr Venus’s shop in order to try to recover that long-lost leg.

From these, in a narrow and a dirty street devoted to such callings, Mr Wegg selects one dark shop-window with a tallow candle dimly burning in it, surrounded by a muddle of objects vaguely resembling pieces of leather and dry stick, but among which nothing is resolvable into anything distinct, save the candle itself in its old tin candlestick, and two preserved frogs fighting a small-sword duel. Stumping with fresh vigour, he goes in at the dark greasy entry, pushes a little greasy reluctant side-door, and follows the door into the little dark greasy shop [...].

“Good evening, Mr Venus. Don’t you remember?”

With slowly dawning remembrance, Mr Venus rises, and holds his candle over the little counter, and holds it down towards the legs, natural and artificial, of Mr Wegg.

“To be sure!” he says, then. “How do you do?”

“Wegg, you know,” that gentleman explains.

“Yes, yes,” says the other. “Hospital amputation?”

“Just so,” says Mr Wegg.

“Yes, yes,” quoth Venus. “How do you do? Sit down by the fire, and warm your — your other one.” [...].

[…] the little shop is so excessively dark, is stuck so full of black shelves and brackets and nooks and corners, that he sees Mr Venus’s cup and saucer only because it is close under the candle, and does not see from what mysterious recess Mr Venus produces another for himself, until it is under his nose. Concurrently, Wegg perceives a pretty little dead bird lying on the counter, with its head drooping on one side against the rim of Mr Venus’s saucer, and a long stiff wire piercing its breast [...]. As the muffins disappear, little by little, the black shelves and nooks and corners begin to appear, and Mr Wegg gradually acquires an imperfect notion that over against him on the chimney-piece is a Hindoo baby in a bottle, curved up with his big head tucked under him, as he would instantly throw a summersault if the bottle were large enough. (Our Mutual Friend: 122-123).

We approach Venus’s shop through Wegg’s point of view and what is impressed on us is its surreal indeterminacy. It is literally and commercially obscure in its identity. Its window display, like its interior, presents a muddle of miscellaneous objects. “Nothing is resolvable into anything distinct”. The constituent elements are unrelated to each other such that it seems impossible to assemble the sense of a coherent shop or commercial practice of any kind; and Dickens here, as he often does, defers identification of the establishment for some time,
revelling in grotesque mystery. This is the practice of the novel as a whole, of course.

The duelling frogs, the little dead bird impaled on a long piece of wire, the large-headed Hindoo baby in a bottle — this is like one of the monstrous fantasies of Hieronymous Bosch, which Lacan had invoked in describing the nightmare of bodily fragmentation. The weirdly assorted contents of the shop swim in and out of darkness, in a pageant of floating dismemberment reminiscent of the child David’s earliest memories of his environment.

The motif of indeterminacy carries over into the next stage of the scene and the protracted debate about human miscellaneity and homogeneity:

“And how have I been going on, this long time, Mr Venus?”
“Very bad,” says Mr Venus, uncompromisingly.
“What? Am I still at home?” asks Wegg, with an air of surprise.
“Always at home.”
[…] “I don’t know […] to what to attribute it, Mr Wegg. I can’t work you into a miscellaneous one, no how. Do what I will, you can’t be got to fit. Anybody with a passable knowledge would pick you out at a look, and say, — ‘No go! Don’t match!’”
“Well, but hang it, Mr Venus,” Wegg expostulates with some little irritation, “that can’t be personal and peculiar in me. It must often happen with miscellaneous ones.”

“With ribs (I grant you) always. But not else. When I prepare a miscellaneous one, I know beforehand that I can’t keep to nature, and be miscellaneous with ribs, because every man has his own ribs, and no other man’s will go with them; but elsewhere I can be miscellaneous. I have just sent home a Beauty — a perfect Beauty — to a school of art. One leg Belgian, one leg English, and the pickings of eight other people in it. Talk of not being qualified to be miscellaneous! By rights you ought to be, Mr Wegg.”

[…] Mr Venus takes from a corner by his chair, the bones of a leg and foot, beautifully pure, and put together with exquisite neatness. These he compares with Mr Wegg’s leg; that gentleman looking on, as if he were being measured for a riding-boot. “No, I don’t know how it is, but so it is. You have got a twist in that bone, to the best of my belief. I never saw the likes of you.”

Mr Wegg having looked distrustfully at his own limb, and suspiciously at the pattern with which it has been compared, makes the point:

“I’ll bet a pound that ain’t an English one!”
“An easy wager, when we run so much into foreign! No it, belongs to that French gentleman.”

As he nods towards a point of darkness behind Mr Wegg, the latter, with a slight start, looks round for “that French gentleman,” whom he at length describes to be represented (in a very workman-like manner) by his ribs only, standing on a shelf in another corner, like a piece of armour or a pair of stays.

“Oh!” says Mr Wegg, with a sort of sense of being introduced.

“I dare say you were all right enough in your own country, but I hope no objections will be taken to my saying that the Frenchman was never yet born as I should wish to match. […] I have a prospect of getting on in life and elevating myself by my own independent exertions,” says Wegg.
feelingly, “and I shouldn’t like — I tell you openly I should not like — under such circumstances, to be what I may call dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there, but should wish to collect myself like a genteel person” (Our Mutual Friend: 124-127).

The endless comic play on miscellaneous identity seems to me one of the funniest episodes in Dickens. “Laughter degrades and materializes”. In the grotesque realism of this scene many of the novel’s prime thematic concerns and satirical targets are degraded and materialised into comic absurdity: the puzzle of identity (chiefly in John Harmon’s story); social class hybridity and the constitution of the gentleman (Veneerings, Charlie Hexam and Headstone); the Podsnapian xenophobia. Wegg’s conviction that a dispersed body is to be deplored as a serious disqualification for social gentility, let alone for a coherent personal identity, is reminiscent of Peggotty’s status in David Copperfield.

The button-bursting, bodily shapelessness of Peggotty was associated with a joyful folk culture that celebrated, rather than deplored, undiscriminating community, unstructured relationship, that “brimming-over abundance” that belonged to “the collective ancestral body of all the people”. In a nightmare of collapsing identity boundaries, Wegg realises that his dispersed body parts might have contributed to a physiologically cosmopolitan skeleton (“One leg Belgian, one leg English, and the pickings of eight other people in it.”), the corporeal epitome of pan-European man.

We have, of course, by now discovered what Venus’s profession is, taxidermist and articulator of skeletons. Only he can make articulate sense of the miscellaneous human and animal material in his warehouse. In this respect, as indeed in the respect of their both owning that curious ornament the sword-duelling frogs or toads, Mr Venus improbably resembles his novelist creator. In the Postscript to this novel Dickens made the analogy between his craft and that of the weaver at his loom: only he, from the outset of a novel, could perceive the relations of the finer textual threads to the whole evolving pattern. The analogy with the weaver is rather like David Copperfield’s use of the imagery of the net: his image for the capacity (beyond the reach of the child) to construct a web of relationships in which individuals can be placed and given specific relational significance. Like the weaver, the serial novelist has to articulate miscellaneous textual components, over a year-and-a-half’s work, into a coherent fictional body. Likewise it is Venus alone who can give articulate form and coherent identity to the obscure, heterogeneous components swimming in the darkness of his shop.

Articulateness in linguistic terms — whether it be tested in writing a Valentine letter or in conversation or in meandering monologue — is the equivalent to Mr Venus’s work on the human body once it is reduced to
skeletal parts. It is the same principle of making syntactical sense of random components. Syntactical dismemberment (if one can call it that) is one the richest sources of comedy in Dickens, all the funnier when set off in relief from articulate, buttoned-up prose, as in the encounters between Pickwick and Jingle. In order to get on in life (to revert to Wegg’s way of putting it) one would not want one’s speech to be dispersed (like Mrs. Nickleby’s, like the epistolary struggles of the Wellers) – a part of it here and a part of it there – but one would to collect oneself, syntactically, like a genteel person.

The centrifugal force militating against dispersal, against syntactical formlessness, against the fragmented body-image is the articulator: the articulator of bones and of words, phrases and sentences. The comedy in Dickens explodes again and again when that battle is joined.

I mentioned a while back the ambivalence in Dickens about these fantasies of fragmentation. Let me finish with what comes to be seen as an instance of the positive valuation of the fragmented body image. It comes from *A Christmas Carol*. I repeat here the formulation from Bakhtin quoted at the start of the paper:

> The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic “economic man”, but to the collective ancestral body of all the people (1984: 19).

The “private, egotistic, ‘economic man’” uncannily epitomises Scrooge. Scrooge has severed himself from the human family, from the swarming people for whom he should feel a human kinship and responsibility. He has curbed his bodily appetites to just about the minimum possible: a bowl of thin gruel to nourish him, and one coal in the grate to warm him. He repels the festival of plenty and the offer of human warmth and relationship. The leading themes of the images of bodily life, so Bakhtin writes, “are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance”. Let us take the first two. Fertility implies sexual vitality and reproduction; growth implies development and enlargement. Scrooge has renounced sexual love long ago, when he broke off his boyhood love for Bella, in exchange for the golden idol of money, in that short scene witnessed in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Past. Development and enlargement are quite beyond him now. He refuses to live in the past or in the future, and therefore has renounced growth. He has willed himself to be isolated, exclusive, sterile: the epitome of “economic man”, voluntarily immured in the Lacanian fortress, insulated from those marshes and rubbish-tips.

But all around him circulate the forms of life that he has rejected: the social detritus of the poor and crippled, and the compensatory
world of almost supernatural “brimming-over abundance” that Dickens evokes in his Christmas scenes:

There were great round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girted Spanish Onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish friars [. . .] There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made in the shopkeepers’ benevolence to dangle from conspicuous hooks, that people’s mouths might water gratis as they passed… (Christmas Carol: 89-90).

Dickens’s metaphorical activity continually implies an exchange between things and people as though this seasonal superabundance had taken over the whole world, except Scrooge. Metaphor is itself a manifestation of endless permutation – like the Bakhtinian body. Now these are chestnuts in a shop window display: suddenly (how?) they are jolly old gentlemen. Onions grow sleek and fat and suddenly turn into Spanish friars. How has this happened? These are simile constructions that run to excess. The prosaic “like” is virtually squeezed out of functional existence by the autonomous vitality of the vehicle. “Grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” are the Bakhtinian properties of the grotesque bodily principle. And this is just the world of popular Christmas as conjured up by Dickens in antithesis to Scrooge’s emaciated egotism. It is also just the right description of Dickens’s exuberantly festive prose style, rhetorically supporting the extraordinary excess of his Christmas vision.

Perhaps the most bizarre manifestation of the fragmented, constantly changing body to confront Scrooge is the Ghost of Christmas Past:

It was a strange figure – like a child; yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child’s proportions. [Its “strangest quality”, though, was its polymorphousness] as its belt sparkled and glittered now in one part and now in another, and what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness: being now a thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away (Christmas Carol: 68).

This extraordinary figure appears to be continually growing and immeasurable. It is frightening, as in the Lacanian dreams of corporeal fragmentation, and yet it comes as a principle of redemption for Scrooge, and is imaged in terms partly of the life-affirming Bakhtinian body. It announces itself as the ghost of Scrooge’s past. It seems constantly to be unravelling any sense of a coherent, determinate body.
It is, for Scrooge, like a nightmare of the true self imaged in all its hybridity, as an uncoordinated assemblage of limbs, a congeries of all ages from childhood to adulthood, unconstrained by time and season in its summer-winter wear, unrealised yet as the "I" that is to be formed according to the processes hypothesised by Lacan. The Ghost, like the nightmare of the fragmented body image, has come to deconstruct Scrooge: to reveal to him the inner complexity and apparent contradictoriness of his multifold being that he has suppressed in the interests of a self that he has wilfully constituted as a coherent, unified, buttoned-up, exclusive being. itself a fantastic image of fragmentation, the Ghost comes to break Scrooge up (or break him down); and the disintegration of the old unitary Scrooge is joyously restorative.

Works cited