

DICKENS THE DESIGNER

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Preface

'I don't invent it', Dickens told Forster of the visionary process by which his imagination worked, '– really do not – but *see it*, and write it down.'¹ See it, and write it down. The claim in its staggering simplicity is a testimony not only to the essentially visual nature of Dickens's inspiration, but also to his effortless mastery of technique. The means by which mere words can be used to convey visual images – a subject on which the modern literary theorist can tease us out of thought – is to him so obvious as to need no commentary. For Dickens, words avail; and he can slap the substance of his vision down on paper without pausing to doubt whether the translation from the visible to the verbal can be made.

The focus of my study is on what Dickens sees, rather than on the means by which he writes it down. I have toyed with the possible title *Dickens and the Visible World*, by way of contrast with Harry Stone's intriguing study *Dickens and the Invisible World*.² I have even considered competing with Ian Watt's 'Oral Dickens'³ with my own 'Ocular Dickens'. But I have chosen *Dickens the Designer* because of the useful dual signification of the word 'design' in English – as both a mental construct or plan, and a visual projection, such as a drawing. (In French the two meanings are differentiated in spelling as *dessein* and *dessin*.) Dickens the designer is the Dickens who saw himself as an artist in a visual mode, a delineator in the graphic tradition of Hogarth – one who, as his titles suggest, produced 'sketches' by Boz and 'pictures' from Italy. But Dickens is also a designer in a more comprehensive way: one who plans and arranges the material of his vision into shapes of beauty and significance. And here, again like the painter, he often chooses motifs such as mass, light, space and colour to provide structural unity, thematic emphasis and aesthetic pattern.

Dickens's novels, as he would have claimed himself, need to be 'seen' as well as read, and my approach has been to assume that

the words are an effectively pellucid medium of a special kind of vision. Painting itself is no more. Although critical theory of our century has taught us to be cautious about making analogies between the arts,⁴ the Victorian writers did it all the time, and took Horace's maxim of *ut pictura poesis* quite for granted. In the famous seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede* George Eliot develops an elaborate parallel between the material of novels and the material of Dutch genre painting in which she consistently talks of the novelist as using a 'pencil', and makes no apology for the confusion of media. 'Wordpainting is, in the verbal arts, the great success of our day',⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins declared in 1887. Henry James looked on the 'double analogy' with the philosopher and the painter as part of the 'magnificent heritage' of the novelist.⁶ And Conrad was only articulating what novelists had been practising for decades⁷ when he memorably declared, 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.'⁸

Few would dispute that, if making the reader *see*, through the power of the written word, is indeed the novelist's task, Dickens is a master. 'In the power of evoking visual images', as George Orwell said, 'he has probably never been equalled. When Dickens has once described something you see it for the rest of your life.'⁹ The great film-maker Eisenstein treats a sequence in *Oliver Twist* as a ready-made set of images for a perfect cinematic sequence.¹⁰ There can be no doubt that to examine the visual in Dickens's novels is to encounter his work where it is great and effective. The difficulty is in knowing what to pick and where to stop. My topic clearly comprehends most of the traditional aspects of fiction, including character, setting, imagery, and by extension thematic and stylistic concerns. The illustrations of the novels, and Dickens's knowledge of the visual arts, are also clearly relevant matters. And all his works, so strenuously visualised as they are, should be my province, starting with the first, which he chose to call 'sketches'. A critic of the visual in Dickens has an embarrassment of riches.

I have chosen to concentrate initially on character. George Henry Lewes, in taking Jane Austen to task for not sufficiently describing the appearance of her characters, cites Dickens as his model of the novelist who is always alert to 'the subtle connections between physical and mental organisation'. Whereas Jane Austen

enables us to *know* Mr. Collins, he says, and 'the delicious folly of the inward man . . . Dickens would not have been content without making the reader *see* this Mr. Collins'.¹¹ As Stefan Zweig pointed out, 'His psychology begins with the visible; he gained insight into character by observation of the exterior.'¹² It is Dickens's unrivalled power to make character visible, and his iconography of physical appearance, that form the subject of the first part of this study. Dickens was like Hogarth in having, in Johnson's phrase, 'attentive eyes / That saw the manners in the face'. In this first section I range among all the works, in order to deduce his typology and extract the terminology of his body-language. The Dickens of this section, besides being a graphic delineator in words, is a physiognomist, a phrenologist, and an expert on clothing and gesture and all the outward and visible manifestations of moral and psychological essence.

Besides the individual and local portraits within the novels, some of the novels themselves may in some sense be apprehended as large pictures (though of matter described rather than painted), compositions in which mass and line, colour and tone, and light and shade are artistically designed and contribute to meaning. To explore some of these large-scale visual effects, in the second section of my study I have singled out certain novels, from *Pickwick* to *Our Mutual Friend*, for concentrated treatment.

In a definition that Dickens would have approved, Conrad declared,

art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, . . . what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence.¹³

In paying attention to the forms and colours and lights and shadows of Dickens's compositions, I intend to render the highest kind of justice I can to *his* visible universe.

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References and Abbreviations

All references to Dickens's novels are to the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London: Oxford University Press, 1947–58), reprinted as the Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 21 vols. References appear in the text, with abbreviated titles as follows:

<i>BH</i> <i>Bleak House</i>	<i>MC</i> <i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>BR</i> <i>Barnaby Rudge</i>	<i>NN</i> <i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>CB</i> <i>Christmas Books</i>	<i>OCS</i> <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>
<i>DC</i> <i>David Copperfield</i>	<i>OT</i> <i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>DS</i> <i>Dombey and Son</i>	<i>PP</i> <i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>ED</i> <i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>	<i>RP</i> <i>Reprinted Pieces</i>
<i>GE</i> <i>Great Expectations</i>	<i>SB</i> <i>Sketches by Boz</i>
<i>HT</i> <i>Hard Times</i>	<i>TTC</i> <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
<i>LD</i> <i>Little Dorrit</i>	<i>UT</i> <i>The Uncommercial Traveller</i>

References to Dickens's letters appear in the notes, with a shortened reference as follows. Where possible I refer to the Pilgrim Edition; I use the Nonesuch Edition for letters that have not yet emerged in the Pilgrim Edition.

Nonesuch *Letters*: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter, 3 vols, in *The Nonesuch Dickens* (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938).

Pilgrim *Letters*: The Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–).

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Part I

Outward and Visible Signs

‘My lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can’t unlearn five minutes afterwards’
Browning, ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’

1 The Value and Significance of Flesh

Dickens was constantly examining the relation between the outward and visible and the inward and spiritual. For him, more than for most writers, the visible signs are reliable and speak a truer language of the essence of character, at least for those who know how to read them, than the character's words or actions. All artists, if they consider their art at all, must ponder the relation between appearance and reality; and much great literature, particularly, is concerned with appearances that are illusory or deceptive. But there is a sense in which Dickens's art is like the painter's in its declared faith in the visible as the true. Dickens had learned the painter's lesson that Browning's Lippo Lippi stands by, 'the value and significance of flesh'. Against the Prior's orders, 'Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!' Lippo argues that the painter's business is to 'Make his flesh liker and his soul more like', and at the same time. The painter's philosophy is everywhere present in Dickens's novels. 'As an emotion of the mind will express itself through any covering of the body,' he tells us of Charles Darnay when he is on trial for treason, 'so the paleness which his situation engendered came through the brown upon his cheek, showing the soul to be stronger than the sun' (*TTC*, 58). The body is soul incarnate, and the soul will express itself through the body even against odds such as a suntan. For Dickens, as for Lippo Lippi, the outward and visible world 'means intensely'. In his novels, and especially in his creation of character, there is a consonance between appearance and essence that pertains more usually in the visual than in the verbal arts. He belongs in the tradition of Hogarth, Gillray and Rowlandson, as much as in that of Fielding, Smollett and Sterne. It is no accident that in his first work, *Sketches by Boz*, he writes as a kind of semiotician, studying visible phenomena as signs – door-knockers as symbols for their owners; houses as signalling their occupants;

faces, clothes, carriages, cabs all as telling a story about something else, some inner reality that is accessible only by this language of appearances.

Once we know what a Dickens character looks like, we know already a great deal about him. Uriah Heep *is* his cadaverous face and hand, his lashless eyelids, his close-cropped red hair, his closely buttoned black suit, his writhing gestures. As David sees him in that first encounter, so he is to enact himself as the action of the novel unfolds. By comparison, what does it matter to us that Hamlet is fat, or that Emma Woodhouse has hazel eyes, or that Lambert Strether wears a moustache?¹ But Dickens's characters are what they appear, and he requires that we pay attention to their appearance. It is his standard procedure to offer us a verbal portrait on the introduction of a new character. To skip this passage of 'mere description' – so some impatient modern readers, used to receiving their visual images from film and television, are apt to call it² – would be to skip the essence of the characterization. This is why Dickens is so rich a source for the visual adaptations of illustration, dramatizations on stage and film, and endless ornamental figures on tea sets, toby jugs, and ceramic tiles. We can all recognize Pickwick, Fagin, Bill Sikes, Barnaby Rudge with Grip, Sairey Gamp, Micawber, Miss Havisham, whether we see them drawn in silhouette in the pages of *The Dickensian*, or painted on a set of mugs. And the images that we recognize are not from Phiz's original illustrations, though those may influence our preconceptions, but translated directly from Dickens's texts.

'Believe me,' writes the physiognomist narrator of 'Hunted Down', 'my first impression of those people, founded on face and manner alone, was invariably true' (*RP*, 668). ('First Impressions' in Jane Austen, as we gather in *Pride and Prejudice*, are by contrast almost invariably false.) But Dickens as narrator, through his introductory descriptions of the face and manner of the characters, affords his reader the essential matter for accurate judgement.

Sometimes, and most usually in his earlier novels, he offers a simple equation between beauty and goodness, ugliness and evil. Oliver, whose hardships might be expected to make him coarse and deformed, remains beautiful, and when Mrs Maylie finds the pale sleeping child with his long hair, 'in lieu of the dogged, black-visaged ruffian' she had expected, she concludes, 'This poor child can never have been the pupil of robbers!' Dr. Losberne

takes the sceptical view of the man of the world, and cautions her, 'Vice . . . takes up her abode in many temples; and who can say that a fair outside shall not enshrine her?' (*OT*, 216–7). The answer is that Dickens can say so, and does. He routinely rejects the doctrine that beauty is only skin-deep. It is his villain Ralph Nickleby who declares, as he steels his heart against his beautiful niece Kate, 'I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face. . . . There is a grinning skull beneath it, and men like me who look and work below the surface see that, and not its delicate covering' (*NN*, 400). He would be a better man if he allowed himself to respond to the delicate covering, for Kate Nickleby, if not Pope's Belinda, deserves the acclamation, 'Behold the first in virtue as in face!' We hear of Florence Dombey, too, that her 'guileless heart was mirrored in the beauty of her face' (*DS*, 249). In later novels Dickens makes the equations more complicated. In cold beauties such as Lady Dedlock and Estella the good and the beautiful have been detached, although we may still read their characters in their appearance by more subtle signs.

Evil and ugliness also go together with reliable regularity in the early novels. Fagin talks and acts like a 'merry old gentleman', but his appearance – his 'villanous-looking and repulsive face' (*OT*, 56) – declares him. Likewise Monks's evil passions, as Brownlow righteously tells him, have 'found a vent in a hideous disease which has made your face an index even to your mind' (378). In lighter vein, the narrator considers the embarrassing revelations that a face may make in spite of its owner's intentions. Justice Fang has a give-away flushed face. 'If he were really not in the habit of drinking rather more than was exactly good for him, he might have bought an action against his countenance for libel, and have recovered heavy damages' (71). In the grotesque dwarf Quilp, who is deformed as well as ugly, Dickens created perhaps the most memorably wicked appearance in literature.³

Such routine alignments of ugliness with evil of course lay Dickens open to the charge of being unfair to freaks and cripples. That case was put to him most eloquently by the original of Miss Mowcher, the dwarf hairdresser, who had recognized herself, and complained bitterly. As a kind of penance he not only rehabilitated her character, but incorporated the complaint into *David Copperfield*. 'Take a word of advice, even from three foot nothing', Miss Mowcher tells David. 'Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason'

(464). Dickens must have considered his reasons solid enough, however, for he did not give over the habit of aligning physical blemishes with mental ones. A reviewer of *Bleak House* objected to his 'cruel consideration of physical defects', and his 'determination to exhibit snub minds and pimpled tempers, principles that squint, and motives that walk on club-feet'.⁴ But through his career – and perhaps the advice he received from three foot nothing had something to do with this – he did develop in subtlety in suggesting the connections between appearance and character, and he abandoned the simple equations.

If his wicked characters are by and large more memorable and more successful than his good ones, it is largely because he could *see* them better. His conception of flawless beauty, like his conception of perfect goodness, seems to have been single and static, where the deviations from them are endlessly various. Oliver and Little Nell, apart from being children, have surprisingly little to distinguish them, visually speaking. Certain adjectives, such as 'pale', 'graceful', 'spiritual', are attached to them at different times, but we are told little of their physique, features, colouring or clothing. By contrast we have a plethora of minutely specific information about Fagin's matted red hair and greasy flannel gown, and about Quilp's discoloured fangs, long crooked yellow fingernails, and habitual leer. The portraits of the good women, especially, tend to be vague and unspecific. This is Rose Maylie:

She was not past seventeen. Cast in so slight and exquisite a mould; so mild and gentle; so pure and beautiful; that earth seemed not her element. . . . The very intelligence that shone in her deep blue eye, and was stamped upon her noble head, seemed scarcely of her age, or of the world; and yet the changing expression of sweetness and good humour, the thousand lights that played about the face, and left no shadow there; above all, the smile, the cheerful, happy smile, were made for home, and fireside peace and happiness. (OT, 212)

We see how Dickens's visual imagination is failing him. He tries to 'see it, and write it down', but the visual image keeps getting clouded by his eagerness to convey directly the inward and spiritual without pausing long enough at the outward and visible. He is trying to paint the soul without minding the legs and arms.

He starts talking about her build, 'slight and exquisite', but then rushes to a flurry of adjectives that refer to her moral rather than physical being – 'so mild and gentle; so pure and beautiful'. We hear about the deep blue eye, but most of the other nouns are abstract: 'intelligence', 'sweetness', 'good humour', 'peace and happiness'. The reader accustomed to the more specifically descriptive portraits feels he is the victim here of a snow job, and is being borne down by conclusions without being offered the evidence for them. The description of Agnes Wickfield is the same. We hear practically nothing of her appearance, though that is what is ostensibly being described, but we are to accept on faith that she looks and is 'placid and sweet', 'bright and happy', 'quiet, good, calm' (*DC*, 223). By contrast the portrait of Rosa Dartle in the same novel is searingly precise, both in the visual detail and, consequently, in the moral and psychological extension.

There was a second lady in the dining-room, of a slight short figure, dark, and not agreeable to look at, but with some appearance of good looks too, who attracted my attention. . . . She had black hair and eager black eyes, and was thin, and had a scar upon her lip. [There is more detail on the scar.] . . . I concluded in my own mind that she was about thirty years of age, and that she wished to be married. She was a little dilapidated – like a house – with having been so long to let. . . . Her thinness seemed to be the effect of some wasting fire within her, which found a vent in her gaunt eyes. (292)

Rosa Dartle is a much more interesting character than Rose or Agnes, not because she is morally flawed while they are good, but because she is fiercely visible, and – being made so by Dickens – she convinces us not just that she has a physical existence but also and simultaneously that she has an inner life. The wasting fire within her indeed finds vent – is expressed and communicated not just to David but to the reader – in her external appearance. When we have come to expect such expression of the internal through the external, the mere assertions about Agnes's moral attributes seem slack and unconvincing.

The instances in which Dickens presents extremes of good and evil through straight beauty and ugliness are of course relatively few. He prided himself on greater range and subtlety in his physiognomical language. Appearance declares the truth even of