

5095929
THE READER IN
THE DICKENS WORLD

— SUSAN R. HORTON —



THE READER IN THE DICKENS WORLD "

(Style and Response)

Susan R. Horton

University of Massachusetts



© Susan R. Horton 1981

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission

First published 1981 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed in Great Britain
by Redwood Burn Ltd
Trowbridge and Esher

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Horton, Susan R
The reader in the Dickens world
1. Dickens, Charles – Style
I. Title
823'.8 PR4594

ISBN 0-333-27692-2

Note on the Texts

ABBREVIATIONS

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

Page references are to volumes in *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (London: 1948-58). I have put all references to the novels in brackets after each quotation: book numbers in large Roman numerals, chapter numbers in small Roman numerals, page numbers in Arabic numerals. I have not referred to the pagination of the Clarendon editions of *Oliver Twist*, *Edwin Drood*, *Dombey and Son*, or *Little Dorrit*, because although those are fine and authoritative editions, I presume their cost prohibits their being part of the libraries of any but the most ardent Dickensians.

Preface

Subtling a book 'Style and Response' might be regarded as evidence of either great naïveté or great audacity, as the briefest survey of representative critical position shows. After years of debate, we still are not sure either what 'style' is, or where it can be said to be present in a literary text. Even if and when we come to some agreement on where it is, we certainly do not begin to agree on what it does – to texts, to meanings, to readers – or even, as a matter of fact, if it does anything at all. Is style present where there is 'regularity' of language?¹ Or is it, contrarily, evident in the 'deviation from the norm'?² Roman Jakobson's by-now classic formulation for allowing us to recognise the 'poetic function', or style, in a text ('the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination')³ gave us all a fine, sharp principle to hold on to as we went looking for style, but as Jonathan Culler noted in *Structuralist Poetics*, one can safely say that 'one has an instance of the poetic function only when one can point to effects which might be explained as the result of particular projections of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination'.⁴

Instead of beginning a search for style in and with the text, Culler would have us begin with ourselves and with our own responses to the text, then go back to the text to discover what linguistic patterns there had been at work in it that had caused those effects in us. Working backwards and inductively, we would arrive at a definition of and recovery of style.

This seems logical, rational, and promising. But two major difficulties remain to one who would talk about style and response. First, as Culler notes, 'even where linguistics provides definite and well-established procedures for classifying and describing elements of a text it does not solve the problem of what constitutes a pattern and hence does not provide a method for the discovery of patterns. *A fortiori*, it does not provide a procedure for the discovery of poetic patterns.'⁵ The reader is thrown back upon his own sensitivity and

common sense to discover where style is (it is present wherever I am affected by the text), but he is also thrown back on his own resources to generate a method for discovering those affective patterns, or perhaps even for generating the patterns themselves (depending upon whether I believe patterns are in texts, or in readers). The second major difficulty is revealed in Berel Lang's musings in a recent *Critical Inquiry* essay, in which he wonders whether 'the phenomenon of style – what stylistic categories categorise – is not perhaps a mode of personification and an end in itself rather than, as has more often been held to be the case, an instrumentality supposed to act on behalf of some other purpose'.⁶

Jakobson believes we can identify the poetic function, or style, in a literary text. Culler says that we have no method for discovering poetic patterns, and that we need to know what the effects of style are before we can find style in the first place. But Lang poses the possibility that style may be present only for its own sake, and may not necessarily be generating effects or meaning at all. The critic who would talk about 'style and response' is squeezed on all sides. It would seem to be time for some audacious – or naïve – stipulative definitions of terms like *style*, *pattern*, *effect* and *meaning* that will allow the critic some room and freedom in which to say something intelligent and interesting about particular literary works.

'Style', Berel Lang says, '*represents* the assertion of content.'⁷ I like this definition, because it implies that wherever there is content, there is also style; and wherever there is style, there is also meaning. Jakobson tells a story in 'Linguistics and Poetics': a missionary blamed his African flock for walking undressed. 'And what about yourself?' They pointed to his visage. 'Are not you, too, somewhere naked?' 'Well, but that is my face.' 'Yet in us,' retorted the natives, 'everywhere it is face.' In this study, everywhere it is face.⁸

What style does and means are questions that can only be addressed and answered by an honest analysis of how the text strikes me as a reader. The texts are Dickens's. I find them rich, complex, various, as full of contradictions and multiplicities of meaning as life itself. With that perception, I have gone back to Dickens's texts to try to account for my perception of his works, and I have constructed patterns in his works to explain and account for my feelings about them. In doing so, I have indubitably and intentionally violated a usual critical practice. Critics are wont to talk about patterns of imagery; about symbolic patterns; about theme and vision. Ross Chambers suggests that

the structuralist revolution, or more precisely the trend towards linguistic analysis of texts manifesting the so-called poetic function of language, has immeasurably increased our understanding of the types of relationships, paradigmatic and syntagmatic, which constitute the '*littérarité*' of texts. But it has necessarily left out of account those relationships which, because they are hierarchical, do not so easily admit of contrastive analysis in terms of binary equivalences; these are the 'interpreting relationships' which exist between a specific segment of discourse within a text and the text as a whole.⁹

I have taken this observation as an invitation to do something a bit different, but necessary, if I am to account for the meaning I think Dickens's texts bear. We usually combine image with image when we make statements of meaning. We stay on, in Professor Chambers's terms, one level or hierarchy when we interpret. I have not. I have patterned, for instance, not image with image, but image with rhetoric. I have assumed, as Seymour Chatman suggests in his new book *Story and Discourse*, that novels do not neatly divide into description, narration and commentary. Rather, description also provides implicit commentary; narration does as well.¹⁰ In Dickens's novels, this implicit commentary that lies hidden in description often runs counter to the explicit commentary in the novels. I have needed to talk about image and rhetoric as if they were of the same hierarchical rung so that I could uncover the reason for my own rich responses to Dickens's novels.

Many of the separate observations of stylistic features that I shall make are not new. People have been comfortable talking for a hundred years, for instance, about the fact that Dickens's descriptions of characters often evoke the prospect of humans become beasts. They have claws and beaks; are chickens, snakes, eels, lynxes. I have combined these images, however, not with one another, but with the rhetoric that surrounds them. Doing this has resulted in the same old observations being turned into interpretations that are a bit different. 'The usual prelude to change' of an idea, an interpretation, a perception, or a theory, as Thomas Kuhn suggests in his Preface to *The Essential Tension*, 'is . . . the awareness of anomaly, of an occurrence or set of occurrences that does not fit existing ways of ordering phenomena. The changes [demand thinking in a new way], one that renders the anomalous lawlike, but that, in the process, also transforms the order exhibited

by some other phenomena, previously unproblematic.’¹¹ Kuhn is talking here about the interpretation of scientific data. But what he says turns out to be true of literary interpretation as well. I began with a perception that Dickens’s novels often felt contradictory. I have constructed patterns in them to explain the origin of my feelings about their contradictory nature. In the process I have necessarily transformed the previously unproblematic – those images of people looking like beasts, for instance – into something somewhat more problematic than they had been before.

Except in my last chapter, I also connect not only across hierarchies, but across novels. My reader will not find in my table of contents the usual chapter on each novel, with an opening chapter on *Pickwick Papers*, and a conclusion on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. This is not because I don’t believe in giving readings of novels – my last chapter is a reading of *The Old Curiosity Shop* – or because I see no change or development between Dickens’s early and late novels, but because I am more interested in asserting those patterns and combinations and consequent effects that I see present and running through all of the novels. Finally, I believe what G. K. Chesterton said first and best:

Dickens’s work is not to be reckoned in novels at all. Dickens work is to be reckoned always by characters, sometimes by groups, oftener by episodes, but never by novels. You cannot discuss whether *Nicholas Nickleby* is a good novel, or whether *Our Mutual Friend* is a bad novel. Strictly, there is no such novel as *Nicholas Nickleby*. There is no such novel as *Our Mutual Friend*. They are simply lengths cut from the flowing and mixed substance called Dickens – a substance of which any given length will be certain to contain a given proportion of brilliant and of bad stuff.¹²

Whether brilliant or bad, Dickens’s ‘stuff’ is always complex and contradictory, and every Dickens critic has had in one way or another to address that fact. Albert Guerard has done so in *The Triumph of the Novel*.¹³ Barbara Hardy did it superbly in *The Moral Art of Charles Dickens*.¹⁴ When Guerard says that Dickens’s ‘anal imagery and scenes which threaten engulfment, often find a counterweight in controlled syntax if not conversational calm’,¹⁵ he is responding to the kind of contradictions we all perceive. When Alexander Welsh in *The City in Dickens* talks about ‘the variegation and cacophony of his surfaces implying some hidden moral disorder’,¹⁶ he is doing the same. None of us thinks that Dickens is

confused; all of us perceive a richness of possibility for combining the separate elements of Dickens's world; all of us recognise, tacitly at least, that Dickens is different for different readers, depending upon the combinations and patterns critics and readers create out of that richness. 'The only works we value enough to call classic are those which . . . are complex enough to allow us our necessary pluralities,' says Frank Kermode, noting 'the extreme variety of response characteristic of the modern reading of the classic'.¹⁷

We all create our texts, as Albert Guerard makes disarmingly clear at the beginning of his book:

My Dickens is the inventive fantasist and comic entertainer possessed of extraordinary narrative energy and creative power, rather than Leavis's 'serious thinker' and responsible social realist, or another's dark symbolist or a third's programmatic reformer.¹⁸

What follows, then, is an account of *my* Dickens. Coyly, perhaps, Wolfgang Iser once suggested that 'reality is a process of realisation'.¹⁹ If what he meant was that each of us realises a text in one way rather than in another, what I might be allowed to say is that what will follow is the real – my real – Dickens.

I am, of course, all too keenly aware of how one assertion of meaning shuts out others; how one patterning precludes or obscures others; of how, as Stanley Fish says, 'declaratives create the conditions to which they refer'.²⁰ 'Any vigorous thought', says René Girard in 'Critical Reflections on Literary Studies', 'is sooner or later bound to arrive at its own bases; it will end, then, in reduction'.²¹ This has happened to me, and the result is that this study, which began in 1971 as a book on Dickens, by some mysterious process of binary fission became two books in 1978, this one an analysis of stylistic effects in Dickens's novels, and the other an over-the-shoulder look at my own assumptions in generating and asserting the presence of those patterns and meanings. Those more theoretical speculations and explorations are to be found in my *Interpreting Interpreting: Interpreting Dickens's Dombey*.²²

The author and publishers wish to thank Oxford University Press for permission to quote from *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*.

Contents

<i>Note on the Texts</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 Intention, Text and Response	4
3 Sequence and Consequence: from Truckling Knave to Trickling Blood	14
4 The Reader at Work	25
1 The Rhetorics of Image and Idea	25
2 Rhetoric and Plot	33
3 The Reticent Rhetorician	41
4 The Rhetoric of 'seems'	49
5 The World beyond the Dickens World	55
1 Dickens's Peripheral Vision	55
2 The Huddle	65
3 The Double Vision	71
4 The Time Telescope and the Labyrinth of the Conditional: the Expanding World in Time and Possibility	78
6 The Dynamics of Description	88
1 Description as Re-creation	88
2 Description as Defence	96
3 Descriptions and Repetitions	99
7 One Reader Reading: the Reader in <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>	110
<i>Notes</i>	122
<i>Index</i>	132

I Introduction

Most critical remarks state in an abbreviated form that an object causes certain experiences, and as a rule the form of the statement is such as to suggest that the object has been said to possess certain qualities. But often the critic goes further and affirms that the effect in his mind is due to special particular features of the object. In this case he is pointing out something about the object in addition to its effect upon him, and this fuller kind of criticism is what we desire.¹

There are some few writers and some few works of fiction that seem especially to fascinate generation after generation of critics. No matter how much is said of those works, they never seem to exhaust us, or we them. No matter how much we say about the work, the age, the writer, the style, and the relationships between and among these things, no matter how many structural, symbolic, and imagic patterns we trace in them, we are left with the feeling that a part of the essential meaning or significance we *feel* them to have has eluded our grasp. I have always felt this to be particularly true of the novels of Dickens. And I am not alone. Anyone who works his way through the last hundred years of Dickens criticism discovers that all of Dickens's critics, his contemporaries as well as modern critics, sooner or later begin to talk about Dickens's 'excess of energy', his 'energy of presentation', and about the 'echoes' or 'resonances' in his novels. What all of these words or phrases are, among other things, are recognitions and acknowledgements of the lack of correspondence or equivalence between our private responses to and our public critical pronouncements about Dickens's novels. Chesterton is acknowledging this gap when he says of Dickens's characters that the 'inside is always larger than the outside',² and we agree without hesitation, having very little if any real idea what those words might mean. Mario Praz called Dickens's characters 'more alive than life',³ and we know what he means, too. E. M. Forster explains that Dickens's 'flat' characters can move us because

they are moving by 'galvanic energy', the parts of the novel that are alive galvanising the parts that are not, thus making the characters appear to 'jump about and speak in a convincing way'.⁴

I am hardly interested in denigrating such honest attempts to construct rational analyses to account for and explain our emotional responses to Dickens's novels. Too often the naïve appreciator in us gets separated from the scholar-critic, and any effort at a re-integration of the two is one of the main tasks recent critics have set themselves to. In Dickens's case, the first step in that process has to be a putting of Dickens back together again. Historically, we have tended to dichotomise Dickens into a 'good' Dickens and a 'bad' Dickens. The first is an artistic genius who created hundreds of brilliantly conceived characters and intricately interwoven plots; the other is a hack who wrote bathetic melodrama and was given to rhetorical over-kill. We have submitted the former to analysis, the latter mostly to apology, in spite of the fact that we know the fullest criticism we could provide would analyse the whole. If rich and complex symbols are plentiful in the novels, so are the stumblings into the bathetic, and ultimately our responses to Dickens's creations must be assumed to be born out of both of these things; indeed, it will be my major point that the presence of the one affects our responses to the other, and vice versa. We have talked about Dickens's 'style' – his moral style, his comic style – as if it were possible to talk about Dickens's style in the singular in any book except one that would be called *Charles Dickens: The Protean Style*. Dickens wrote mystery stories in the style of the Gothic novel; descriptions that call up, by turns, a romance, a travelogue and a Faulkner novel; episodic narratives that belong in a picaresque tale; the oratory appropriate to a nineteenth-century sermon; the rhetoric of a Victorian periodical; the comedy, by turns, of an eighteenth-century play of humours, and a twentieth-century black humourist. And, further, he changed from one mode or style to another in the space of a paragraph.

So multiple is Dickens's style, and so various his language, that historically the temptation has been either to isolate and analyse the separate parts, conquering by division, or simply to surrender to the texts, exclaim and enjoy. The history of Dickens criticism has been a movement from one of these impulses to the other, and back again. I would like, however, to keep my eye on Dickens's multiple modes of presentation as much as or more than on his symbols or images or themes or plots alone, and I shall do so not merely in the interest of

some kind of critical tidiness. In the process of asking why Dickens chose to write in such a multitude of modes, we can learn much about Dickens's intentions, and about his own responses to the world around him. In the process of balancing his intentions against his achievements, and discovering at what points his achievement seems to exceed his intentions and at what point his texts seem to do other than he intends, we can begin to uncover and understand, I think, the origin and causes for our own rich responses to the Dickens world.

Talking about not only a writer's intentions but about a reader's responses to those intentions as they are expressed in a literary text has become more respectable in recent years than it had been for a long while. Still, one who does it is destined to feel a bit like one who takes a walk through a demilitarised zone, expecting to be fired upon from any direction. Still, if talking about a writer's intentions and a reader's response leads me into perilous territory, the rewards, I think, are at least equal to the perils.

2 Intention, Text and Response

An important sentence in semiotics runs: within a system, the lack of one element is important in itself. If one applies this to literature, one will observe that the literary text is characterised by the fact that it does not state its intention, and therefore the most important of its element is missing. If this is so, then where is one to find the intention of a text? The answer is: in the reader's imagination.¹

The literary text presents reactions to and attitudes toward the real world, and it is these reactions and attitudes that constitute the reality of a literary text.²

Charles Dickens's literary intentions, as he expressed them, were simple enough. He said again and again in his letters, his speeches, and in the Prefaces he wrote for various editions of his novels that he wanted to 'brighten up the lives and fancies of others'. He wanted to 'increase the stock of harmless cheerfulness' in the world; to tell his audience 'that the world is not utterly to be despised'. He wrote to please and to entertain. Being a writer for an audience whom John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson have described as 'delicately responsive'³ to his every move, he was delighted each time he was smitten by what he often called 'a pretty idea', and always eager to see 'what effects' its execution would generate in his readers. Dickens found serial publication worth the headaches it gave him partly because that form allowed him to sample the reactions of his readers and to adjust his style and sometimes even his story in response to their opinions and preferences. When people whose judgement he respected, Lord Jeffrey or John Forster, for instance, expressed doubts about his treatment of some characters (Edith Dombey, Walter Gay, Pip and Estella), after consideration he changed the portrayal of those characters. When his audience

responded favourably to his comedy, his pathos, his melodrama, his optimistic rhetorical and plot assurances of how the world was a good place and could be made better if people would only behave decently, being a popular pleaser he responded by creating more comedy, more pathos, more melodrama, more rhetorical assurances, more stories full of happy endings, as his audience requested.

What is most interesting to me, however, is what happens to Dickens's style as a result of the fact that both his own and his audience's demands and needs were contradictory. He was writing for a people who lived, as George Ford describes, 'looking backward to Regency high spirits, and forward to Victorian earnestness'.⁴ They expected not only to be pleased and entertained, but were sure they ought to find some moral or lesson in books as well. When Thomas Carlyle reviewed Sir Walter Scott's novels, he was partly reflecting and partly generating the expectations and tastes of the times when he concluded that 'the Waverley novels were suitable family fare, to be sure, but what lessons did they teach?'⁵ And there was still a further demand on the writer who would please a popular Victorian audience. The first twenty years of the nineteenth century in Britain had been marked by a terrible insensitivity in the laws it enacted. Penalties for crimes and treatment dictated for the care of paupers were harsh; laws protecting workers were largely non-existent. So harsh was the temper of the times that Walter Bagehot described the third decade of the nineteenth century and after, the years during which Dickens, of course, was writing, as a time in which 'the unfeeling obtuseness of the early part of the century was to be corrected by an extreme, perhaps excessive, sensibility to human suffering in the years which followed'.⁶

The point is this: if Dickens's intention was to please the Victorian popular audience, he needed to answer to, if not reconcile, all of these conflicting demands. That is, he needed to promote as keen a sensitivity to social injustice and sufferings of the poor as he could – and at the same time entertain with high jinks and high-spirited comedy. He needed to provide as vivid a picture as he could of those sufferings and their causes – and still maintain the reassuring optimism and faith in God and social progress that popular propriety demanded. He needed to provide enough moral rhetoric to 'teach a lesson' – and still be sure that that lesson was neither too radical nor too conservative, and risk losing a part of his audience. And in the midst of satisfying these demands, he needed, as all those of us who have read biographies of Dickens know, to exorcise some

of his own private demons – expel some of his own restlessness – as well.

No one, I think, was more suited to reconciling the conflicting demands of the age than was Dickens. He was the quintessential Victorian, who shared all of their contradictions. He was the writer of books crammed full of plot and rhetorical recommendations of family warmth, who confessed that he could never show his affection openly to his own children once they had passed out of infancy. His son, Henry Fielding Dickens's book *Memories of My Father* is most poignant when it speaks to this point. Further, Dickens was a defender of and romanticiser of hearth and home whose own marriage dissolved in a sea of recriminations. He was a protester against prestige and position, who sent his eldest son to Eton (albeit, of course, at the expense of Angela Burdett-Coutts). He was a clear-eyed realist living in the world as it was, whose ironic response to a young writer denouncing that world was 'What a lucky thing it is, you and I don't belong to it.'⁷ And he was enough of a romantic to be dismayed and surprised to discover that his first great love Maria Beadnell was at the age of forty-four no longer the charming vixen she had been twenty years before. He was both the urbane and witty after-dinner speaker, and the histrionic actor whose readings moved women to faint and men to cry. He was the incurable optimist and believer in social change whose novels stand as testimony to his faith that human hearts could and did change, and the pessimist who confessed in exasperation to John Forster that he felt 'no faith or hope – not a grain' in either the people or in politics.⁸ He was one of those writers who confess that they 'write because [they] can't help it',⁹ and yet was also one who could confide quite as readily that he saw himself as 'the modern embodiment of the old Enchanters, whose Familiars tore them to pieces'.¹⁰ He was the calculating businessman and self-disciplined man, who not only made his own fortune, but retrieved his father, his family, colleagues and friends from the edge of financial ruin time and time again, and the restless waif who as his life went on literally drove himself into the grave in a frenzy of work, trying to avoid his own 'giddiness and restlessness of heart', and his own undefined and uncontrollable urges. The proportions changed during his life, of course: he was more restless late in life than he had been earlier; more calculating later in life than he had been earlier; but the contradictions remained with him, both early and late.

He shared the political and social and moral contradictions of his

age as well. He saw institutions like the Bowes Academy of William Shaw, where twenty-five boys between the ages of seven and eighteen died and were buried between 1810 and 1834 and another ten went blind from infections left untreated, and saw slums like those of St Giles, Bethnal Green and Saffron Hill where child prostitutes and paupers trudged through the offal and garbage mixed with the mud of the streets – and still believed, if we are to take his novels seriously, that simple, personal goodness of heart and private acts of charity could be the answer to social problems. He wanted to believe he lived in a moral universe in which good was rewarded and evil punished, and yet he wrote novels in which Fate, as often as a just God, determines action and consequence. He saw merit in a democratic social system, and yet he defended the Mechanics' Institute against those who feared it would 'confound the distinctions of society and render people dissatisfied with the grades into which they have fallen' by announcing smugly that 'the different grades of society are so accurately marked, and so very difficult to pass that I have not the slightest fear of any such result'.¹¹

There is no shame, of course, in being of several minds about major social issues. As Alexander Welsh shows in his book on Dickens and the city, the city itself was new and complex enough to make such contradictory feelings inevitable: one didn't even know what to do with the mortal remains of all those who died in the cities, since the customary resting places, the parish cemeteries, were finite.¹² Welsh's chapter titles are a litany of the things Victorians felt ambivalent about, and the list is long: work, charity, forgiveness – and the city itself.

In spite of all these contradictions, conflicting impulses, half-formed and contradictory notions about what was and was not to be believed, and what was and was not to be done to make the world a better place; in spite of all of the gaps between what he wanted to be true and what his perceptions told him really was true, Dickens shared, above all, that other characteristic of the Victorians, a constitutional indisposition to expressions of incertitude. Looking for admissions of uncertainty anywhere in Dicken's novels is, as George Bernard Shaw said in another context, like looking for a nautilus in a nursery. Like Mark Tapley, Dickens always needed to 'come out strong'.

My thesis is simple. Dickens reconciled those conflicting demands of his audience, and he satisfied his own conflicting attitudes towards both personal and public issues, simply by parcelling out