The Magic Lantern

Representation of the Double in Dickens

Maria Cristina Paganoni

THE MAGIC LANTERN
Representation of the Double in Dickens

Maria Cristina Paganoni

Studies in Major Literary Authors

Edited by

William E. Cain
Professor of English
Wellesley College

Studies in Major Literary Authors

William E. Cain, *General Editor*

Acknowledgments

This book began as a doctoral thesis at the School of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. I am deeply grateful to Prof. Allan Ingram and Dr. Philip O' Neill for providing me with the precious opportunity to research and write on Charles Dickens under their attentive supervision. I thank them both, in particular, for finding time to receive me on my every visit to the UK, which had to be fitted in round my hectic schedule in Italy. Such a mix of scholarly rigour and existential flexibility allowed me to attend a course of study which would not otherwise have been possible for me and which stands as a unique experience in my life.

My warmest thanks go to Prof. Alessandra Marzola of the University of Bergamo, who supported my project in Italy and generously offered illuminating insights into my area of research in its early stages. Her continued constructive criticism throughout the project was invaluable.

The University of Milan, my *alma mater*, was the place where I developed my addiction to Dickens, many years ago, as an undergraduate; it is also the academic environment where I currently work. My research would be unthinkable without the network of relationships—professors, colleagues, students—I have had the opportunity to create there over the years. I would like to mention Prof. Itala Vivan for the several useful suggestions that helped me explore wider critical horizons than I would have discovered alone. I owe very special thanks to Prof. Giuliana Garzone, who waited patiently for the completion of my thesis and then offered me to work with her. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Lidia De Michelis, with whom I share the irrepressible need for literature, with its joys and dangers. I would never have embarked on a doctoral program without her invaluable friendship, which continues to this day to give generous support and stimulating advice.

Contents

Introduction

*"And now, show the man of misery and gloom
a few of the pictures from our own great storehouse!"*[1]

*He looked the phantom through and through,
and saw it standing before him.*[2]

An optical instrument for projecting images by means of hand-painted and then photographic glass slides, the magic lantern had been enjoying an unbroken popularity in the Victorian period since its invention in the seventeenth century.[3] Magic-lantern shows and their simplified version—phantasmagorias—were a popular form of entertainment in Dickens's time and their connection with the history of cinema is evident.[4] Not only did the magic lantern predate the camera, it continued its existence alongside cinema. Some excerpts from Dickens himself were adapted as magic-lantern shows, though not as many as one would expect,[5] and doubtless the magic lantern was a device well-known to the writer, who employed it for private use in order to entertain family and friends performing tricks and who also mentioned it several times in his writing.

Rooted as it was in the material and visual culture of Victorianism, the magic lantern has appeared to be a suitable emblem for the following study, which aims to focus on the strategies of doubleness in the writer's fiction and, therefore, on the prismatic and finally visionary qualities of his art. The magic lantern worked by projecting a sequence of flimsy and ephemeral pictures and, in more technically sophisticated shows, by blending them together, while the lanternist commented emphatically upon them in front of an emotionally involved audience.[6] Generally speaking, we can detect in Dickens a keen interest in optics and the sensational visual effects generated by the interplay of light and darkness, so much so that in *Great Expectations*

Pip's recollection of creating shadows could be easily attributed to the writer himself:

> Years afterwards, I made a dreadful likeness of that woman, by causing a face that had no other natural resemblance to it than it derived from flowing hair, to pass behind a bowl of flaming spirits in a dark room.[7]

Dickens underlines the power of the magic lantern to evoke images that are strikingly estranging, bizarre and dreamlike, a power with unusual aesthetic consequences.

> These stumps of trees are a curious feature in American travelling. The varying illusions they present to the unaccustomed eye as it grows dark, are quite astonishing in their number and reality. (. . .) They were often as entertaining to me as so many glasses in a magic lantern, and never took their shapes at my bidding, but seemed to force themselves upon me, whether I would or no.[8]

Another eloquent example is provided by the description of Mr Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

> Placid, calm, but proud. Honestly proud. Dressed with peculiar care, smiling with even more than usual blandness, pondering on the beauties of his art (architecture) with a mild abstraction from all sordid thoughts, and gently travelling across the disc, as if he were a figure in a magic lantern.[9]

And also:

> You never in all your life saw anything like Trotty after this. (. . .) He sat down in his chair and beat his knees and cried; he sat down in his chair and beat his knees and laughed; he sat down in his chair and beat his knees and laughed and cried together: he got out of his chair and hugged Meg; he got out of his chair and hugged Richard; he got out of his chair and hugged them both at once; he kept running up to Meg, and squeezing her fresh face between his hands and kissing it, going from her backwards not to lose sight of it, and running up again like a figure in a magic lantern.[10]

> Tackleton the Toy-merchant (. . .) was a domestic Ogre, who had been living on children all his life, and was their implacable enemy. He despised all toys (. . .). He had even lost money (and he took to

that toy very kindly) by getting up Goblin slides for magic-lanterns, whereon the Powers of Darkness were depicted as a sort of supernatural shell-fish, with human faces.[11]

I had a dim recollection of having seen her at the theatre, as if I had seen her in a pale magic lantern.[12]

Jo stands amazed in the disk of light, like a ragged figure in a magic-lantern.[13]

During many hours of the short winter days, however, when it was dusk there early in the afternoon, changing distortions of herself in her wheeled chair, of Mr Flintwinch with his wry neck, of Mistress Affery coming and going, would be thrown upon the house wall that was over the gateway, and would hover there like shadows from a great magic lantern. As the room-ridden invalid settled for the night, these would gradually disappear: Mistress Affery's magnified shadow always flitting about, last, until it finally glided away into the air, as though she were off upon a witch excursion.[14]

No wonder, then, that Dickens's writing often played with the phantasmagorical arabesques of fiction, and especially with the motif of the double, thus offering extraordinary imaginative and upsetting insights into the compelling question of identity and of its provisional representations. In his mapping of the self, conceived as a dynamic entity generating new narratives and, at the same time, being modelled by the discourses of its culture, Dickens included the relationship of the self with space and also the confrontation with history when it was not antagonistic. And, just as magic-lantern shows were very thrilling and exciting for their audience, so Dickens's novels and stories have lost nothing of their rich appeal to their readership even up to the present day.

However, the most important reason for discussion of the magic lantern is as an apt image to emphasise the surrealistic qualities of Dickens's imagination, his discarding of realistic representation in favour of "a new syntax of visual description, in which forms affect and ply the discursive quality of the text" and "images (. . .) now freely surge out of a mysterious matrix, where dream and perception coalesce and generate their capricious figural order, imposed by a logic of their own."[15] By breaking up the consequential logic of the narrative with the superimposition of visual icons telling their own "double" story, Dickens does not simply prefer a poetic to

a more rational diegetic organization, a complex moral comprehension of life to the oversimplified morals that were often informing the pedagogic Victorian novel. Rather, he shows that logic and dream coexist side by side, mutually influencing each other in the endless reworking of experience, in the incessant dialectic between reason and desire, and through the creative transformations of language.

If we assume, therefore, that Dickens resorts to an epistemology of representation that subverts the aesthetics of conventional nineteenth-century realism opting for a richly imaginative way of writing, we should now try to analyze and understand the role and the importance played by the double in Dickens's mode of representation. In order to do so, in the first place, it is essential to clarify and delimit what is here meant by the "double" and to stress the fact that we are faced with a complex concept and with multifarious literary realizations of it.

In other words, we are dealing here with a notion of the double which cannot but be taken as covering several meanings and which is based on the assumption, supported by much textual and macrotextual evidence, that doubleness indeed provides a major point of access to the Dickens world and to Victorian culture. Doubleness is to be intended as a general imaginative category which is especially sensitive to the multiplicity of points of view and the potential meanings embedded in representation. Though it is true that any narrative, and certainly not only Dickens's, contains a chorus of voices and refuses unequivocal signification, Dickensian textuality is veritably engaged, almost obsessed, with the imaginative task of both showing the double side of people, the world, and Victorian culture, and also the unexpressed and inexpressible sites of transgressive desire and unorthodox dissent.

Through doubleness, therefore, Dickens thematizes the ideological nature of all discourses, produced as they are from a position of inevitable ideological involvement, and reveals the double voicedness inscribed in textuality, which opens up more or less visible cracks in the seemingly apparent cohesion of discursivity; he represents the self as multiple and mutable and shows how the process of construction of identity in a given culture is always implicated with power relationships; he explores the correspondences between the fragmentation of space and the fragmentation of the self and, finally, he alludes to the "double" sides of his culture, that is, to those silenced and repressed areas expelled by Victorian hegemony in order to contain dissent. He provides a many-sided reflection of Victorianism, energised by the interplay of different and overlapping images and, in so doing, he offers a stimulating and controversial reading of the discontinuities of his culture.

The basic assumption on which this work is grounded is that language carries the traces of the incessant conflict between rational control and desire and is necessarily implicated with subjective and partial commitments and ideologies, since no enunciative act takes place in a psychological and historical vacuum. After choosing this enlarged critical perspective, therefore, it will appear quite understandable why the double is here credibly extended to include not just the occurrence of double characters in their diverse manifestations—a common theme in nineteenth-century literature as will be discussed below—but the several instances of doubling patterns as they are employed at the phonetic, syntactic, semantic and symbolic levels of discourse. We certainly find different types of double characters in Dickens—duplicitous individuals, Doppelgängers, schizoid selves—but it would be reductive to limit our analysis just to doubling in characterization, despite its indisputable interest in any discussion about the construction of identity and its undeniable imaginative appeal.

In fact, the double acts as a powerful dynamic principle informing Dickens's works syntactically, semantically, and semiotically. This trope also informs the rhetoric, thematization, characters, setting, narrative focalization, and plot, that is, all levels of his discourse world. Phonetic and lexical cases of isotopy, parallelisms and antinomies, anaphora, puns and malapropisms, ellipsis and euphemism, repeated textual allusions, and recurring symbols are only a few of the several forms through which Dickens engages with linguistic and discursive doubling patterns using the whole spectrum of the emotional shades that range from comic playfulness to depression and melancholy. Characters' mimicry, ventriloquism and use of stereotypes emphasise the imitative attitude of speech styles through the doubling of unimaginative ideological clichés. Double plots are another macro-structural example of the use of multiple viewpoints whenever, as happens with increasing frequency in Dickens's later "dark" novels, the narrative design intertwines two or more different stories establishing subtle and mutually illuminating reciprocal allusions. Finally, if we also assume that Dickensian representation is in a lively, reactive connection with his culture and provides an imaginative response to it, we should also try to identify those "double" areas of Victorian culture, those interstices that inspired and were most suggestive for the writer's textuality. Reached by Dickens's individual and cultural imagination, these sites reflect back a problematic and critical image of Victorianism and of its hegemonic organization of consent, which leaves several crucial problems in the ambiguous shadow of discursive indeterminacy.

The double therefore appears to offer a critically credible and creative access to Dickens, revealing him once more as a writer who was reacting to

the most pressing issues of his episteme, embedded them in his discourse world, and fully responded to their provocation, energised by the unsettling power of his imagination. A metacomment on the partiality of any representation as well as a trope for identity understood as a dynamic construct which is influenced by a plurality of overlapping and sometimes competing discourses, the double is simultaneously sensitively culture-specific and leads us directly into the multiply divided heart of Victorianism.

In order to display fully the potentialities of meaning of the Dickensian double that have been concisely listed above, this study has been organised so as to progress from the linguistic analysis of literary discourse as it is exploited by the writer in its multiple expressive possibilities across techniques of characterization and space description to arrive at a more general survey of a few pertinent areas of Victorian culture implicated with his fictional world. The canonical fields of rhetoric and stylistics have been re-mapped and re-read with the insights and the tools of critical discourse analysis so as to become sensitive to the contending ideologies working throughout the texts and to the subversive meanings of Dickensian symbols. Bakhtin's notions of polyphony, heteroglossia, and double voicedness as well as Foucault's investigation of the nexus between power and discourse in the formation of criteria of legitimacy have provided a substantial theoretical background for the analysis of Dickens's work and Victorian culture more generally.[16]

This study, therefore, intends to move ahead of the symptomatic treatment of a thematic aspect of the Dickens oeuvre, an aspect which has already been dealt with topically by other scholars in its literal meaning and in its symbolic expansion.[17] It aims to interpret Dickens's textuality in the light of the double taken in its widest linguistic, metaphoric and symbolic implications and, in order to do so, it will concentrate mainly on the fiction Dickens wrote after *David Copperfield*, that is, on his mature and late period, where doubling patterns occur with particular frequency and salience.

As for the double in characterization, Dickens's satire of duplicitous people, the proliferation of parallel or contrastive characters emblematising the interplay of psychic drives, the implausible metamorphoses, the representation of split personalities and finally, with an appeal to the supernatural and the uncanny, the emergence of eerie doubles like ghosts and spectres[18]— these are all well-researched areas in Dickensian scholarship and have found a fruitful theoretical support in psychoanalytic criticism. Quoting Rank's 1914 article *Der Doppelgänger*, it was Freud himself who stressed the relationship between the double and *das Unheimlich*,[19] or the uncanny, in order to explain part of the dark and frightful fascination of repetition. He argued that the double emerged out of primary narcissism aiming to exorcise the power of

death and then it developed into its opposite, the uncanny announcer of death, which explains what we perceive as its fearful symmetry.[20] He also added that the image of the double contains the ego's censored aspects, its possible, attractive yet unachieved future plans, and its frustrated efforts and repressed acts of will, all of which we will find well exemplified in Dickens, not only in his fully-developed doubles but also in the several allusions suggesting unexpected connections between characters.

At the formal level, too, critics have often discussed the prismatic design of his novels, the mirroring cross-references between main plot and subplots, the binary relationships between strings of characters and the juxtaposition of settings. However, a comprehensive macrotextual interpretation of the multiple significations of his doubles is still missing, while unfortunately there exists the naïve tendency to read the double extratextually and referentially. Dickens's autobiographical encoding of his life in his novels never stops circulating in a more or less subterranean way.[21]

Two aspects of the double, in particular, appear not yet to have been extensively analysed. The first concerns the language, or languages, of the double. Since doubling and doubles are a central and lasting Dickensian obsession, one might ask how the language of his fiction registers this phenomenon or, in other words, how his imaginative energy comes to terms with the complexities of representation and also the symbolic order of the Victorian episteme itself, with its complicated cultural doubleness. This raises questions about what is legitimised or de-legitimised by Dickens, what is voiced and what should stay unvoiced but escapes, nevertheless, from textual depths to resurface in the narrative under disguise. We will see, in fact, that a counter-discourse is powerfully at work undermining the writer's apparently outspoken, mainstream ideology and that the controversial themes of subversive desire, challenging law, race, gender, class, capitalism, imperialism, and the hegemonic system, perceived as disharmonious and grotesque, are all equally embedded in Dickensian textuality.

The attempt to retrieve and interpret the competing accounts echoing through Dickens's oeuvre should also be assessed by remembering that the most subversive contents of his fiction are constantly curbed by the ideological and formal constraints of the Victorian novel, a literary genre characterised by explicit pedagogic intents and by a style which aimed to be popular, entertaining, and morally irreproachable. It is impossible to understand and appreciate Dickens's rhetoric in its theatrical variety of nuances, from the comic, the hilarious and the grotesque to the satirical, the angry and the melancholic, to the sentimental and the pathetic, without perceiving, below the surface of his words, the red-hot magma of a volcanic imagination which

subverted the realm of literature itself, changing not only the modes of publishing,[22] but above all the modalities of fictional representation.

The double is in fact one of the devices which allowed Dickens to tamper with the limits of representation, twisting and turning the realistic novel until it was transformed into something on the verge of apparent dissolution like Dickens's last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend*. Here the centrifugal structuring denies even the presence of agglutinating symbols such as Marshalsea or Chancery. However, since any representation is not just a transparent reflection of the world, but simultaneously a deeply codified rewriting of it where epistemic vibrations are captured and circulated, one might also ask which old meanings were imploded and which new ones were specifically activated by the writer's use of the double or, in other words, which areas of Victorian culture were felt to be no longer vital and meaningful and which ones, instead, were perceived to contain new openings, unexpected possibilities of change.

The analysis that follows will show that the double is from the start—and increasingly so with time—a site of Dickens's most controversial imaginative and ideological concerns, a site where all the excitement, the pain and the "great expectations" of the Victorian subject in its increasingly lonely and delusive strife, are comprehensively recorded. The double works as a distorting mirror of epochal illusions, magnifying disturbing self-images of the individual and his society. It veils, while it also reveals, the unstoppable return of Eros in sexually repressed Victorian culture; it shows the degree of self-delusion of the promise of unceasing social progress as a consequence of the success of scientific thought.[23] What is socially censored by the dominant patriarchal, capitalist, middle-class values is also advertised: upward mobility, women's emancipation, working-class visibility, a less rapacious relationship with money, and free artistic expression.[24] By creating surrogate characters living all sorts of often intertwining lives, Dickens's writing hints at several virtual possibilities of existence and, in so doing, generates an incredible amount of energy. In a society which is denying the dehumanising effects of industrialization, the double undermines the Romantic cult of identity by showing that everyone is easily replaceable and voicing the fear of utter anonymity. It underscores the dubious ascent of the self-made man and his obsession with status and it deflates the myths of his success, insinuating the suspicion that, in spite of all their self-aggrandising efforts, everybody will remain forever a prisoner of their darker, neurotic double, that is of their insecurities and fears. Finally, in its increasingly hallucinatory representation of a schizoid self and society which culminates in the portrait of the crumbling world of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), the trope of the double shows

that the heart of Victorian England is dark and anguished, that its "centre does not hold" either psychologically or historically despite the hegemonic claim to the contrary.

Peter Brooks has described the typical hero of the nineteenth-century novel as a peculiar sort of wishing machine whose undercurrents of desire set the entire plot into motion.[25] Though Dickens gives free rein to the aspirations of his characters, they seem to lead nowhere, but this alone would not suffice to prove that in his fiction Dickens shows the "vanity of human wishes." Such a classical stance would belong to a meditative and controlled mood which is neither truly Dickensian nor Victorian and which does not find correspondence in the formal elements of his narrative. On the contrary, it is evident from the very beginning of Dickens's career that his fiction is not just a polyphonic elegy on the decline of a once stable self and society—such a prelapsarian state does not exist in Dickens, not even as maudlin nostalgia. Dickens is radically a *homo novus*, whose comic spirit and desublimating gaze, even when they are benevolent, as for example in *The Pickwick Papers* with its bunch of gallant and absurd provincial gentlemen, are intrinsically disrespectful of the establishment and the old order. This obviously marks the distance between his vision and—say—Elizabeth Gaskell's or George Eliot's description of an organic and conservative society.

Dickens's is rather an aggressively imaginative and innovative apprehension of irreversible dynamism, often rendered by the bizarre and polymorphous traits of the grotesque. Later on, when the comic vision of his youth gives way to a growing sense of sadness and irrevocable pessimism, his narrative obeys less and less whatever rule of harmonic design is left for the novel and embodies in its uncontrollable diffusiveness and hysterical use of language the complete exhaustion of Victorian realism.

In this sense Dickens himself is a "double" writer, the most popular Victorian novelist on the one side and on the other, probably, the most destructive and antagonistic against the very world that made him. This is all in spite of himself—one would be tempted to say—and the well-known connivance of his public image with the system. He was doubtless more innovative than several other Victorian writers (Moore, Meredith, Gissing, even Hardy), whose more explicitly daring ideology is often embedded in an overly didactic language that therefore sounds much less creative and symbolically powerful. Dickens, instead, takes the novel—a form of representation based in the first place on a collective fiction concocted by Victorian ideology and meant to support it by articulating a reinforcing mirror image—and pushes it to limits which decree its end as such.