



DICKENS'S STYLE

EDITED BY
DANIEL TYLER

CAMBRIDGE

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DICKENS'S STYLE

Charles Dickens, generally regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian age, was known as 'The Inimitable', not least for his distinctive style of writing. This collection of twelve essays addresses the essential but often overlooked subject of Dickens's style, with each essay discussing a particular feature of his writing. All the essays consider Dickens's style conceptually, and they read it closely, demonstrating the ways it works on particular occasions. They show that style is not simply an aesthetic quality isolated from the deepest meanings of Dickens's fiction, but that it is inextricably involved with all kinds of historical, political and ideological concerns. Written in a lively and accessible manner by leading Dickens scholars, the collection ranges across all Dickens's writing, including the novels, journalism and letters.

DANIEL TYLER is a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Research Fellow in English at Oxford University and a Lecturer in English at Lincoln College, Oxford.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organisation, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and have called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work that intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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Editions and abbreviations

Where possible, we have used the Clarendon edition of the novels. Where there is no Clarendon, the latest Oxford World's Classics edition has been used, unless otherwise stated. The Penguin editions of *Pictures from Italy* and *American Notes* have been used. *Sketches by Boz*, *The Uncommercial Traveller* and other short pieces are taken from the Dent edition of the *Journalism*. Abbreviations and bibliographical details are given below. Quotations from these works are incorporated parenthetically within the text. For ease of reference, we have given chapter and page numbers for quotations in the form ([book], chapter, page).

<i>AN</i>	<i>American Notes</i> , edited by Patricia Ingham, with introduction and notes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000)
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i> , edited by Stephen Gill with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2008)
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i> , edited by Clive Hurst, with an introduction and notes by Ian McCalman and Jon Mee (Oxford University Press, 2008)
<i>CC</i>	<i>A Christmas Carol</i> , in <i>A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books</i> , edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2006)
<i>CH</i>	Philip Collins (ed.), <i>Dickens: The Critical Heritage</i> (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971)
<i>Chimes</i>	<i>The Chimes</i> , in <i>A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books</i> , edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2006)
'CT'	'A Christmas Tree', in <i>Charles Dickens: Selected Journalism</i> , ed. David Pascoe (London: Penguin, 1997)
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i> , edited by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981)

<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i> , edited by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)
<i>ED</i>	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> , edited by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972)
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i> , edited by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)
<i>HM</i>	<i>The Haunted Man</i> , in <i>A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books</i> , edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2006)
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i> , edited by Paul Schlicke with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2008)
<i>Journalism</i>	<i>Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens's Journalism</i> , vols. I–III, ed. Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1994–9) and vol. IV, ed. Michael Slater and John Drew (London: Dent, 2000)
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i> , edited by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979)
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Madeline House, et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982–2002)
<i>Life</i>	John Forster, <i>The Life of Charles Dickens</i> , Library Edition, 2 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1876)
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> , edited by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982)
<i>MHC</i>	<i>Master Humphreys's Clock</i> (Philadelphia, PA: Lee & Blanchard, 1841).
<i>MJG</i>	<i>Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi</i> , 2 vols. (London: Bentley, 1838)
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i> , edited by Paul Schlicke with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2008)
<i>OCS</i>	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> , edited by Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)
<i>OMF</i>	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i> , edited by Michael Cotsell with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2008)
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i> , edited by Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966)
<i>PI</i>	<i>Pictures from Italy</i> , edited by Kate Flint, with introduction and notes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998)
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i> , edited by James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986)

- SB* *Sketches by Boz*, in the *Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens's Journalism*, vol. 1, edited by Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1994–9)
- Speeches* *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, edited by K. J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960)
- TTC* *A Tale of Two Cities*, edited by Andrew Sanders with an introduction and notes (Oxford University Press, 2008)
- UT* *The Uncommercial Traveller*, in the *Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens's Journalism*, vol. iv, ed. Michael Slater and John Drew (London: Dent, 2000)

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Introduction

Daniel Tyler

Dickens was a great prose stylist and yet criticism has frequently disregarded or undervalued his style. Striking but elusive, at once entirely a property of his prose and yet apparently superfluous, style has often evaded the attention of scholarship that is focused on the qualities of Dickens's fiction it considers more meaningful. Whether understood as a set of local verbal details or larger narrative modes, as an imaginative habit or an occasional flourish, as a way of writing peculiar to the author or shared within periods and genres, style has sometimes been deemed incidental, as if it is a merely playful, self-delighting distraction from the plain meaning of the work. Such a view has been fostered implicitly through the crowding out of attention to style in preference for other interests in Dickens's writing, but also explicitly through the kind of attention it has been granted. Early readers who lamented the irregularity of Dickens's prose and its deviations from contemporary standards of correctness, and subsequent scholars who have analysed the techniques and rhetorical features of Dickens's writing, have regarded style, helpfully but limitingly, as an end in itself, cut off from matters of plot and theme and from the deepest interests and values of the fiction. These perspectives have long been accompanied by another view: that Dickens's unruly style runs at odds with the central aims of his writing, whether productively or self-defeatingly. The many purposeful, cooperative contributions of his highly stylised prose to his fiction have been under-represented. This volume seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring the workings of Dickens's style, that is, its inner mechanisms and its outward effects. The chapters demonstrate that the attention of the critic may be rewardingly directed towards the way Dickens writes inseparably from what he writes about.

Dickens looks at the world aslant, and his innovative, narrative style responds to and enables that vision. His sharp observations, combined with his fanciful reimaginings, are registered by his style. It is through style, by its verbal surprises, its arresting effects, that we are made to look

again at what we thought we knew: at places, characters, behaviours, speech patterns, turns of event, at our own sympathies and expectations. Among the most prominent transformational aspects of his writing is his attention-grabbing use of figurative language, often introduced by the promising 'as if', whereupon a bravura act of imagination ensues, unearthing unexpected connections or similarities. Just as noticeable is his habit of anthropomorphism, of bestowing life upon inanimate objects, often by means of as little as an ambivalent adjective or two ('blunt, honest piece of furniture' [*SB*, 177], 'rebellious poker' [*PP*, 35, 537]), and, equally, the converse move of subtracting life from his characters, with a deadening adjective or simile. Dreamlike effects often come upon Dickens's prose when, as he habitually does, he moves into blank-verse rhythms, into repetitions of word or sentence structure, as in the mounting anaphora of his rhetorical sallies, or when he exploits the possibilities of the present tense in long conspicuous passages of it.

So performative a prose has been suspected to operate according to the impulsive, opportunistic forces of comedy, sound and habit, to the detriment of reason and precision. Without doubt, this stylised prose is not self-effacingly subservient to other creative aims. It flaunts itself and makes itself felt as part of the work. Indeed, Dickens's imagination does not exist apart from the style that renders it, for, as Robert Alter has said, style's 'unique enchantments' are 'a privileged vehicle of insight, even of vision'.¹

Dickens's insights not only penetrate the world around him, but they also access the contingencies and opportunities of language. Geoffrey Hill, who has written discerningly on the responsibilities of a literary style and the circumstances that may bear upon it, has suggested that, 'The more gifted the writer the more alert he is to the gifts, the things given or given up, the *données*, of language itself', and Dickens's gifts certainly include a generous receptivity to the treasures and pleasures of a bountiful language.² He is alert to the latent meanings in words, to buried etymologies that prompt, in an instant, a lively wordplay that activates a second comic or subterranean chain of thought. His prose is rich with acoustic effects, such as the linkages of alliteration, assonance and internal rhymes, chimes that build connections of their own amid the representation of a fragmented reality. The gifts of language go far beyond the abundance of near-synonyms for many words, but they include that, and one aspect of Dickens's style is his ability to run through a set of lexical variations for a single thing or trait. His recognition of language's abundant provision is matched by Major Bagstock, in *Dombey and Son* (1846–8), when he calls his 'Native' servant 'so many new names as must have given him great

occasion to marvel at the resources of the English language' – an observation that comes just as his author is about to turn out yet another phrase for Carker's smile: his 'dental treasures' (*DS*, 26, 363).

The accounts of Dickens's style in this volume consider the large-scale, self-advertising representational effects, such as conspicuous figurations and rhetorical structures, and they take us beyond those into the more mysterious intricacies of his prose, into the submerged logic of his verbal play, which have not always been so apparent to critics. Early claims about the looseness of Dickens's prose,³ or longer lasting claims about its irregularity and its disproportion⁴ can conceal the attributes of verbal care and precision, the judicious selection of the apposite word, the sharp ear for nuance and polysemy that also characterise his writing. Passages of fine lexical ingenuity are the surest sign that Dickens's achievement does not lie in some imagined realm of meaning existing prior to, or beyond, the verbal expression, but that it is located in the verbal, stylised writing itself. Style, for Dickens, does not somehow come subsequently to meaning, as if it is just a set of after-effects. It participates in, produces and performs meaning.

The best sense we get of the way Dickens conceived of his own verbal style – alongside the prefaces and the letters of advice to his journals' contributors – is in his fiction, and with special prominence in the short essays and papers of the 1850s and 1860s, often stylistic cameos in themselves. There, Dickens frequently seeks out dramatically innovative perspectives on the familiar world both to incite and to represent his heightened style.

The well-known example of Dickens's fanciful invention in *Hard Times* (1854), where the great factories of industrial Coketown are seen as 'Fairy palaces', is cast as the perspective of rail passengers: 'the travellers by express-train said so' (*HT*, 1, 10, 84). The link between train travel and Dickens's imaginative style is played out in full in his 1851 essay, 'A Flight', which describes the experience of travelling by train from London to Paris (with a ferry connection between Folkestone and Boulogne), a route then newly passable in eleven hours.⁵

Dickens adapts his style to the defamiliarising effects of train travel, working up a flexible syntax and an inventive grammar that can keep pace with the rapidity of his journey and the strangely visionary perspectives it affords:

Now a wood, now a bridge, now a landscape, now a cutting, now a – Bang! a single-barrelled Station – there was a cricket-match somewhere with two

white tents, and then four flying cows, then turnips – now, the wires of the electric telegraph are all alive, and spin, and blurr their edges, and go up and down, and make the intervals between each other most irregular: contracting and expanding in the strangest manner. Now we slacken. With a screwing, and a grinding, and a smell of water thrown on ashes, now we stop! ('A Flight', *Journalism*, III, 29)

The energetic and uneven prose meets a specific representational need, as the syntax itself contracts and expands in irregular intervals and the rhythmical last sentence grinds to a halt, like the steam engine. But with its syntactical and grammatical irregularities, its temporal confusions and shifts of tense, its rhythms, its clipped sentences, its combination of detailed realism and hallucinatory vision ('four flying cows'), its odd collocations ('then turnips'), this is Dickensian prose with many of its long-practised habits.

In its last paragraph, the essay provides its clearest indication that it has been not only an expression of Dickens's style, but a dramatised, conceptualised representation of it. Dickens's narrative persona retires for the night, 'blessing the South-Eastern Company for realising *The Arabian Nights* in these prose days, murmuring, as I wing my idle flight into the land of dreams' ('A Flight', 35). The wonderful strangeness of the Arabian Nights, frequent paradigm of Dickens's imaginative practices, is made real by the estranging, unsettling experience of rapid locomotion. The pun on 'prose' days – plain and commonplace, but hinting at a piece of writing – underscores the analogy, as the pun of the tale's title, 'A Flight', is realised: at once a mode of rapid transportation and an imaginative flight of fancy, such as Dickens's flexible style can effect.

The imaginative, transformational effects of Dickens's visionary style are again prominent in his essay on 'Chatham Dockyard', where they are all the more conspicuous amid the grim, industrial conditions of the shipbuilders' yard.⁶ In the sketch, published in the second series of *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1868), Dickens's fanciful narration tends to tame, to prettify and to subdue the massive machinery at work in the construction of a warship. The powerful machine that cuts and shapes the iron is thought to be an 'obedient monster' ('Chatham Dockyard', *Journalism*, IV, 292). The wood-cutting machines that blow woodshavings into the air around them are 'large mangles with a swarm of butterflies hovering over them' ('Chatham Dockyard', 293). The machine that picks up the logs is recast, recalling a circus or pantomime stage prop,⁷ as a 'Chinese Enchanter's Car'. Under the influence of Dickens's style, no less than the Traveller's idle musings, the industrial dockyard is 'Quite a pastoral scene' ('Chatham Dockyard', 295).