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Introduction

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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

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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

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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 disproportion[4] 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

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> 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).

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As often happens in Dickens's shorter pieces, the essay conceives of its characteristic, transformational style as the product of a dreamy, out-of-the-ordinary mental state – in this case 'a state of blissful indolence':

> Sauntering among the ropemaking, I am spun into a state of blissful indolence, wherein my rope of life seems to be so untwisted by the process as that I can see back to very early days indeed, when my bad dreams – they were frightful, though my more mature understanding has never made out why – were of an interminable sort of ropemaking, with long minute filaments for strands, which, when they were spun home together close to my eyes, occasioned screaming. ('Chatham Dockyard', 295)

Dickens's style romanticises the world, and it entertains, but its strangeness can also be disturbing. Here, as elsewhere, blissful indolence coexists with the terrors of childhood, or opens up access to them. Childhood fears attend characters from Oliver Twist, through Smike, Little Nell and Paul Dombey, to David Copperfield and Pip, but they are as often brought into the narrative style itself, as Dickens's descriptions combine the 'mature understanding' of the adult with the instinctive, unaccountable fears of the child. Many critics have noticed the proximity of Dickens's visionary mode to some form of psychological disturbance, in a line of reading inaugurated by G. H. Lewes's severe critique of the 'vividness of imagination approaching so closely to hallucination' in Dickens's writing, where '*revived* images have the vividness of sensations'.[8]

Such effects are products of style in this passage. Dickens sustains the overlaid image of ropemaking, opportunistically turning it to different ends: moving it into the figuration of metaphor and on to an actual occurrence of his remembered dream. The ropemaking is not so much a well-wrought, bounded metaphor as an image, vivid to the author's mind, in which he apprehends and half-realises latent metaphorical possibilities. It is a feature of Dickens's style that owes much to the poetic faculty by which, contrary to ordinary expectations, words precede and impel the ideas. D. W. Harding once wrote of this quality in Shakespeare, where 'half-activated images … gain their effect through not being brought to the full definition of an exact metaphor'.[9] Something similar happens in Dickens's image of ropemaking here. His sentences are characteristic in their precise verbal agility, for it is the quick play on 'spun' – joining ropemaking and head-spinning confusion – that triggers the metaphor of his rope of life. Later, the impersonal voice of the grammatically isolated phrase 'occasioned screaming' deftly suggests that the strands, which are disturbingly spun home, rather than comfortingly home-spun, recall at once the lively fear of his earlier self and his safe distance from it now. It

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strikes a balance between immediate experience and safe recollection that is characteristic of his first-person narratives.

Dickens knew that the series of imaginative recreations in his sketch of Chatham Dockyard amounted to an investigation into his habitual transformational mode of writing. He hints as much to his readers when he mentions the Chinese Enchanter's Car:

> When I was a child (the Yard being then familiar to me) I used to think that I should like to play at Chinese Enchanter, and to have that apparatus placed at my disposal for the purpose by a beneficent country. I still think that I should rather like to try the effect of writing a book in it. ('Chatham Dockyard', 295)

Given that style is inseparable from Dickens's artistic vision, it is surprising how often criticism, throughout the history of Dickens scholarship, deems it peripheral or considers it a matter of technique detachable from other concerns. One reason for this is the elusive, evasive nature of style as a critical concept. It is often assumed that style is an aspect of writing that is superadded to the plain sense of a passage, and yet it is far from clear that these two things can ever be separated. Style may be what distinguishes a particular writer or what any number of writers can strive to obtain. It may be a property of the writing – features of grammar, syntax and vocabulary – or the product of reading, identifiable only through recurrent usage. It may draw attention to itself by its idiosyncrasy or it may be precisely that aspect of writing that goes unnoticed because of its familiarity. For Dickens's first readers, style was as likely to be an objective standard of correct writing, teachable and transferable, as otherwise, whereas more recent accounts regard style as a mark of individuality, perhaps instinctive as well as distinctive. This volume opens out some of the complications of style as a concept, as the essays assess the handling of language, grammar, syntax and rhetoric that seems distinctively, identifiably, Dickens's.

A legacy of the conceptual separation of style from other aspects of literary achievement has been a long trend of reading it as part of a critical category of its own. This is true, as I have said, of early concerns that Dickens's prose contravenes agreed norms of correctness, deriving from eighteenth-century ideals of rhetorical prose. It was against such criticisms that John Forster, among others, defended Dickens. The idea that style is a formal feature set apart from the ideological and other involvements of Dickens's fiction has persisted. George Orwell's influential essay on

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Dickens treats his ideology separately from his style. He focuses on the paraphraseable, translatable meaning of the fiction, until the essay moves onto more aesthetic concerns in its final section, in what looks like an awkward shuffle: 'I have been discussing Dickens simply in terms of his "message", and almost ignoring his literary qualities', perpetuating the sense that style has little to do with the purposive, ideological work of a novel.[10] In 1970, G. L. Brook's useful study of Dickens's style investigated his language largely in isolation from other creative inclinations.[11] Brook's study recasts some of the early complaints against Dickens's writing when it laments his lack of restraint and the author's illusion-defeating intrusions into his fiction.[12]

Attention to Dickens's style has not been prominent in academic criticism in recent years. Scholarship has tended to focus on Dickens's relation to culture: to the ideological biases and blinds of his own culture, to Victorian material and popular cultures, and to mass culture today. It has often been driven by ideological concerns in its interest in his representations of women, the home, slavery and empire or in his perceived buttressing of middle-class values. It has demonstrated his remarkable investment in and studied depiction of a minutely realised material culture. And it has investigated his continuing presence as a cultural phenomenon, first in his own day and then in the Dickens 'industry' of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[13] Notwithstanding the conceptual complexity and value of many of these approaches, Dickens's style of writing has rarely been of the first importance.

When critics have attended to Dickens's style, the tendency has been to read it as being at odds with the essential meaning of his work. It is thought to betray the contradictions or tensions in his ideology, which he is able to resist more deliberatively in other aspects of his writing, such as plotting and characterisation, which are seen to be less instinctive. Orwell's essay contains an early version of this kind of response. He observes that, 'The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing is the *unnecessary detail*', and it is the apparently superfluous nature of the detail that causes a problem for Orwell's interest in the political purposes of fiction.[14]

For Orwell, style could seem superfluous and, strictly speaking, 'irrelevant' as far as the political and moral commitments of a work were concerned.[15] Other critics have seen it to be more actively troublesome. Marxist readings in the 1960s and 1970s found in Dickens's fiction contradictions and self-contestations that were judged creative, productive responses to the contradictions of nineteenth-century ideology. Often more attuned to

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structure (and to narrative or plot) than to style, such accounts found in the sum total of Dickens's fiction, especially in their habits of excess and unruliness, which are as evident in his style as elsewhere, points of welcome resistance to the dominant ideologies of the nineteenth century.

This habit of mind took a more doubtful, mistrustful turn in later criticism – in the heyday of deconstructive readings of Dickens and, still, in the ongoing ideological critiques of his fiction. In many of these accounts, the uncontrolled energies of the novels, which includes their style, unsettle and resist the texts' attempts to bolster bourgeois ideology. Steven Connor has drawn attention to the way in which the 'unbounded "energetics" of Dickens's writing' compromise various normative Victorian power relations, even though the narrative may also replicate official structures or economies: 'the excessiveness of Dickens's writing … manifests itself in the problematic overflowing of categories, the blurring of boundaries, and the promiscuous commingling of what official ideologies wish to promote as naturally distinct.'[15] The excessive, anarchic principle of Dickens's fiction disturbs the orthodoxies that his fiction is otherwise thought to reinforce.[16] For such critics, style is a rogue element, confounding Dickens's polemical purposes. Their accounts respond to the waywardness of his style, such characteristics as its pleasure in superfluous detail, its digressions and its uncontrolled energies, and they find that these energies complicate the ideological intentions of the fiction.

Dickens's narratives are frequently confronted by embodiments of their own unruly energies. One example of this is his essay 'Gone Astray', written for *Household Words* in 1853.[17] The nine- or ten-year-old Dickens (supposedly) is lost in London, and he wanders around aimlessly, and occasionally fearfully, marvelling at the great city. Recounted from the perspective of the forty-year-old man, the essay thematises aspects of Dickens's characteristic visionary mode, as it conflates innocence and wonder with experience and cynicism.[18] As the boy anticipates various careers – joining the army as a drummer, becoming a chimney sweep or seeking his fortune like Dick Whittington – the essay sets the pleasures of purpose over against the attractions of digression, impulses of both plot and style throughout Dickens's career. This is a narrative in search of a plot, then, when the boy, sitting down to eat a small German sausage while he anticipates his next steps, encounters, all of a sudden, 'a dog with his ears cocked':

> He was a black dog, with a bit of white over one eye, and bits of white and tan in his paws, and he wanted to play – frisking about me, rubbing his nose against me, dodging at me sideways, shaking his head and pretending

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> to run away backwards, and making himself good-naturedly ridiculous, as if he had no consideration for himself, but wanted to raise my spirits. ('Gone Astray', *Journalism*, III, 158–9)

The playful energies of the dog call up the playful energies of Dickens's prose, in the run of present participles, 'frisking', 'rubbing', 'dodging' and so on, which energises the writing, even as it creates a digression. So, too, the language knowingly bestows upon the dog unexpectedly human characteristics: that he can 'pretend' to do anything, or that he has the complexity of character to be 'good-naturedly ridiculous'.

The boy believes that 'things were coming right' and that with the dog by his side he would recover his situation, for the dog 'would help me seek my fortune'.

> I considered by what name I should call him. I thought Merrychance would be an expressive name, under the circumstances; and I was elated, I recollect, by inventing such a good one, when Merrychance began to growl at me in a most ferocious manner.
>
> I wondered he was not ashamed of himself, but he didn't care for that; on the contrary he growled a good deal more. With his mouth watering, and his eyes glistening, and his nose in a very damp state, and his head very much on one side, he sidled out on the pavement in a threatening manner and growled at me, until he suddenly made a snap at the small German, tore it out of my hand, and went off with it. He never came back to help me seek my fortune. From that hour to the present, when I am forty years of age, I have never seen my faithful Merrychance again. ('Gone Astray', 159)

Style misbehaves like this. It has a life of its own, and it runs away with itself under its own impulses. It refuses to be constrained by the intended plot. Style slips the leash. Some critics have found it threatening, too, for all its good-natured appearance and its attempts to raise our spirits. Dickens's short story itself worries that the cheerful, playful, childlike vision is only a fiction; that the brisk realities of life may be darker and more threatening (although with exact comic effect the last epithet, 'faithful', resists complete disabusement). Even the dog's name, Merrychance, signals the anxiety in much of Dickens's later fiction that happy accident might be only a product of irresponsible imagination, not of lived reality.

Dickens's figurative language is particularly prone to this kind of reading. *Hard Times* is the *locus classicus* for ideological suspicion of Dickens's unruly metaphorical style. For example, in an influential discussion of that novel, Catherine Gallagher writes that metaphors, 'especially when they attempt to disguise an ugly reality, are useless even pernicious things'.[19] In

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an insightful introduction to the novel, Kate Flint considers the 'double movement at work in [its] rhetoric'.[20] She writes that Dickens's 'portrayal of the working classes and their environment' is not 'immune to his own rhetorical effects' and goes on to indicate that he 'cannot quite escape from the habits of his own transformative imagination, turning the town into a giant-inhabited fairy-land'.[21] Implicit in this vocabulary is a sense that Dickens's polemical intentions are compromised (albeit knowingly) by his writing, for they are not 'immune to' or able to 'escape from' the habits of his metaphor-making.

Despite the critical suspicion, Dickens was aware that his transformative effects, such as those in the 'Chatham Dockyard' piece, were not always innocent or harmless. He knew that fictional illusions had the potential to unfit his readers for real life. To put it bluntly, wandering around the heavy machinery of a Victorian dockyard in a state of blissful indolence could be dangerous:

> Having been torn to pieces (in imagination) by the steam circular saws, perpendicular saws, horizontal saws, and saws of eccentric action, I come to the sauntering part of my expedition, and consequently to the core of my Uncommercial pursuits. ('Chatham Dockyard', 294)

Dickens's imagination conjures up the fatal violence of which the machinery is capable, and his prose carries the threat into his imaginative pursuits, as 'saw' resounds in 'sauntering'. Dickens's ear hears the blades despite the daydreaming that seems to quieten them, for the threat echoes through the passage: 'torn', 'saw', 'core'. Dickens's transformative style may seem to take the sting out of a threatening world, but he knew as well as his critics that this might only be a trick of the mind, a trick of the text.

The emphasis in most of the critical accounts I have been discussing is on the independent life of Dickens's style, on its divergence from the sense-making functions of his fiction. Certainly Dickens's style is able and often willing to run away from meaning, to fail to perform as required. But that this is not the whole case is best illustrated by one further example.

Eight months after writing that he would 'never see his faithful Merrychance again', Dickens and his readers might be permitted a double-take as the second and third installments of *Hard Times* featured a dog called Merrylegs. Comprising one of the lesser known doubles in Dickens's fiction, the second dog is surprisingly like the first. Like Merrychance, Merrylegs runs away. The novel sustains a question for most

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