CHAPTER 1

Darwin's View from Todgers's
"A decided turn" for Character and Common Words

> Under nature, the slightest differences of structure or constitution may well *turn* the nicely-balanced scale in the struggle for life . . . Let us now *turn to* the nectar-feeding insects in our imaginary case.
> – Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species*[1]

> Whether I shall *turn out* to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.
> – Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*[2]

In the 1871 *Character*, one of a series of popular books on Puritan virtues, Samuel Smiles seems to describe manners as legible, material symptoms of people's real – because interiorized and hidden – self. "MANNER," he writes, "is one of the principal external graces of character"; "A man's manner, to a certain extent, indicates his character. It is the external exponent of his inner nature. It indicates his taste, his feelings, and his temper, as well as the society to which he has been accustomed."[3] Modern readers are accustomed to interpret manners, like clothes, houses, and physiognomies, as evidence of the secreted character of fictional personages and real persons alike. And if we equate manners with style, correlating an author's character with his or her manner of expression is at least as old as Aristotle's explanation of *ethos* in *Poetics*. Hugh Blair reaffirms this correlation in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), which was reprinted and taught throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, Blair actually uses "manner" and "character" interchangeably.[4] Smiles strains to emphasize the personal individuality expressed – "to a certain extent" – by manners in Blair's sense, but he remains cognizant that neither manners nor mannerisms are exclusive to individuals or interiority. They originate from "society," and they are "external graces" – an "external exponent" not because they are manifested outwardly, an exposure of privacy, but because they are social conventions acquired from outside sources and because they articulate the self in relation to society. Manners are generic social conventions for coordinating people and things, not for expressing individual

personality or quiddity. Accordingly, the "character" Smiles finds intimated here does not inhere in a private subject as his property, but instead plays out at the interface of the subject and his or her culture, which makes manners available in the first place.[5]

If manners intimate the interiority of anything, then they might be said to intimate the interiority of the culture itself – which is to say, the shared but unwritten assumptions that animate civil discourse and the attitudes, interests, and mediums of contact bonding that culture as a whole. As Lionel Trilling put it, manners are "that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning."[6] "Our attitude toward manners," Trilling adds, "is the expression of a particular conception of reality" (206, 207). Steven Shapin has more recently elaborated such claims for manners in describing what he calls "epistemological decorum": the styles of civil discourse and comportment that were requisite to producing legitimate knowledge in early-modern British culture.[7] Nineteenth-century Britain had its own conventions of epistemological decorum, which implicitly obliged writers to *characterize* their subjects, however non-human these seemed to be. Characterization in this sense meant affirming that a given approach to a subject redounded morality upon a practitioner, author, or reader, and installing also an affinity or interest in the subject that solicited the sympathetic attention of others. Manners contributed to the production of fiction and non-fiction alike, then, because they were, as stylistic requisites of characterization, stylistic requisites of publication. Everyday words implied that certain scientific and interpretive methods cultivated the "character" – the morality, veracity, and aesthetic interest – that the same words purportedly inscribed into fictional personages. But not exclusively the familiar deep, anthropomorphic character we have come to take for granted . . .

Turn and *character* are, in nineteenth-century British prose, "words that are used with a special frequency," to quote Trilling once again. In a culture obsessed with popular philology, *turn* was one of the manners by which prose asserted its character. As characters in the natural historical sense, everyday locutions like "a turn" concurrently refer to and differ from a recognizable category to intimate a residual particularity, deviation, or non-referential surplus: an inference, self-reference, deference, or difference from the generic. As a medium of characterization, *turns* enable a text simultaneously to refer mimetically like a fact to concrete, reproducible, familiar things, and yet at the same time to diverge discretely from the

referential to some abstract, irreproducible, or unfamiliar quirk. Where the veracity and the morality of the modern fact both depended on real-world referents as guarantors, character was a form of knowledge whose legitimacy instead owed to the manner in which it deviated from or mediated its referents – to implied induction, attention, self-reference, conditional conjecture, or tactful rebuttal. It was a form of knowledge that depended on a formal *turn* from an empirically understood reality.

Character of a "decided turn"

In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), Charles Dickens assembles some bachelor gentlemen at Todgers's boardinghouse for Sunday dinner with the hypocritical Mr. Pecksniff and his daughters, Charity and Mercy. Evoking the opening line of the *Odyssey*, which introduces Odysseus as "a man of many turns" (*polytropos*, in the ancient Greek), Dickens individuates each bachelor by granting him "a decided turn" for one of various incongruous hobbies, habits, and tastes. These guests, he writes,

> included a gentleman of a sporting turn, who propounded questions on jockey subjects to the editors of Sunday papers, which were regarded by his friends as rather stiff things to answer; and they included a gentleman of a theatrical turn, who had once entertained serious thoughts of "coming out", but had been kept in by the wickedness of human nature; and they included a gentleman of a debating turn, who was strong at speech-making; and a gentleman of a literary turn, who wrote squibs upon the rest, and knew the weak side of everybody's character but his own. There was a gentleman of a vocal turn, and a gentleman of a smoking turn, and a gentleman of a convivial turn; some of the gentlemen had a turn for whist, and a large proportion of the gentlemen had a strong turn for billiards and betting. They had all, it may be presumed, a turn for business; being all commercially employed in one way or another; and had, every one in his own way, a decided turn for pleasure to boot. Mr. Jinkins was of a fashionable turn; being a regular frequenter of the Parks on Sundays, and knowing a great many carriages by sight . . . Mr. Gander was of a witty turn.[8]

And so on. As with Odysseus, the character of the bachelors accrues to the repetition of a kind of epithet, but whereas Odysseus as "a man of many turns" incorporates these many turns in his person, the bachelors only achieve that versatility and variety collectively. As individuals they appear atomized and myopic, not to mention shabby. Thus, Dickens diffuses the compelling adaptability of the classical, single protagonist, as if to characterize his prose rather than any of the individual personages it describes.

If the less-than-fetching bachelors even as a group seem a far cry from Odysseus, the range of historical translations of *polytropos* suggests otherwise. By the fifth century BCE the interpretation of the "the *polytropic* man," the man "of many turns," had already become controversial.[9] As the classicist W. B. Stanford explains, "Odysseus's detractors" interpreted the epithet "pejoratively as 'often changing one's character, hence unstable, unprincipled, unscrupulous'"; but Antisthenes, a student of Socrates, "rallied to Odysseus's defense" by claiming "*polytropos* . . . does not refer to character or ethics at all. It simply denotes Odysseus's skill in adapting his figures of speech ('tropes') to his hearers at any particular time" (Stanford 99). Modern classicists typically reject these early translations for an interpretation that melds plot and psychological character: Odysseus has been turned many times by circumstances from his intended course, and therefore he is defined by the detours that defer his return to Ithaca. These experiential turns constitute the plot and inflect his psyche. With this range of ostensibly disparate connotations, the famous epithet aptly condenses some of the array of connotations that Victorians ordinarily mobilized with the word *character*: various notions of dynamic and essential personality, fixed moral principle, rhetorical dexterity (turns of phrase), affective experience or the feeling of contingency, and the ethical valences affiliated with each.

Furthermore, Dickens's arch recourse to "a turn" also performs the taxonomical work of distinction and genealogy: each *turn* concurrently individuates a bachelor and likewise categorizes him as a recognizable species of the London bachelor or genus of commercial gentleman.[10] The taxonomic paradox of concomitant individuality and typicality is perhaps the most common dimension of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century character: its signature individuality is packaged and legible only in conventional forms.[11] From the classical period through the seventeenth century, types were known through the genre of the Theophrastan character, a verbal portrait or sketch of an exemplary personification of a virtue, vice, or vocation. Theophrastan characters typically begin with the phrase "such a one who."[12] Evident in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, these characters were revitalized in Jean de La Bruyère's popular *Caractères* (1688) and in books by Sir Thomas Overbury, Nicholas Breton, and Samuel Butler, all of which were in print throughout the nineteenth century. Henry Morley, for instance, published in 1891 an anthology, *Character Writings of the 17th Century*. Individuals were often conceived as combinations or variations of these types, as the bachelors combine each of their various hobbies, vocations, or habits with the nearly oxymoronic

categories of commercial and gentleman, which were traditionally defined in opposition to each other. The paradox of joint individuality and typicality applies to the characterization of personages as well as objects: as it happens, Todgers's boardinghouse is "such a singular sort of place," yet, as the subsequent sentence nevertheless says, it belongs to an "odd family" of "hundreds and thousands" (*MC* 131). The recurrent *turn* thus underscores the generic form of character that the bachelors and buildings have in common: all of their ostensibly particular interests are formulaically articulated as "a turn" for this or that, and as such these tastes become legible as manifestations of character. At least at the level of prose: if the bachelors themselves seem like caricatures, character here emerges as a matter of form, a formality or manner, more than the implied content of symptomatic mannerisms.

While Dickens's characterization of the bachelors seems to climax definitively and facetiously with the bachelors' consummate "passion for gravy" – "There is no such passion in human nature," Mrs. Todgers proclaims (*MC* 135) – his savvy repetition of *turn* suggests, to the contrary, that the definitive feature of human nature is not a passion at all, but instead the formal paradox instantiated in the generic "turn" that makes humanity legible as such. Through the parody of repetition, that is to say, the dinner at Todgers's suggests that the "characters" Dickens forwards here are not so much the bachelors themselves as individual personages, but the iterative turn of phrase – the trope – that make them legible as such. "A turn" was shorthand, among other things, for such taxonomic traits: Jane Eyre, for instance, seeks in Adèle's "countenance and features a likeness to Mr. Rochester, but found none: no trait, no turn of expression announced relationship."[13] The whole novel abounds in characterological turns, including the kind that classify the Todgers's bachelors: Eliza Reed has "a turn for traffic," Mary Ann Wilson "had a turn for narrative, [and Jane] for analysis" (*JE* 38, 91). As pivot point between individuality and typicality, the iterative "turn" is a character in the natural historical sense.[14]

As Foucault writes, taxonomic characters are marks "selected to be the locus of pertinent identities and differences"; "the character, as established by natural history," he adds, "makes it possible both to indicate the individual and to situate it in a space of generalities that fit inside one another" (140, 159). In the domain of natural history, then, character names a physical feature that usefully instantiates "the relation between visible structure and criteria of identity," for the objective of natural history "is still to determine the 'character' that groups individuals and species into more general units, that distinguishes those units one from another, and

that enables them to fit together to form a table in which all individuals and all groups, known or unknown, will have their appropriate place" (Foucault 226). Natural history and novels alike were invested in characterization, inasmuch as they both sought to isolate features that could articulate individuals in relation to species. As literature and science had not yet been disaggregated into "two cultures," throughout the nineteenth century the novelistic and natural historical connotations of character more readily overlapped and evoked each other.

Form and method were theoretically inseparable from morality and epistemic validity for mainstream Victorians, because credibility was deemed a function of following methods and adhering to form. Part of the importance of the colloquialism or everyday word accrued to its habitualness, which underscored the moral valence of style. Smiles repeatedly describes character as a function of habits in *Self-Help*, and James Fitzjames Stephen writes in "The Relation of Novels to Life" (1855) that "the most important differences between men are differences of habit. What we call character is little else than a collection of habits, whether their formation is to be traced to original organic differences or to any other causes."[15] This theory of habits suggests a performative conception of character as the effect of, rather than the agency behind, gestures, behaviors, and utterances. Up until the point where such locutions become frequent enough to be noticed, and therefore to become parody as "a turn" becomes in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, they also constitute a habit of the author and therefore could bolster (or attenuate) his or her morality. However farcical, then, as a recurrent, colloquial phrase, "a turn" makes the tastes and occupations of the gentleman at Todgers's coherent as habits. This particular phrase also happens to denote a habit or tendency as well as a deviation from the norm; its repetition in a text makes it a habit, but a habit of switching track, transitioning, or adapting like Odysseus. Dickens's style suggests that the formation of such habits originates neither in organic differences – an essential self or romantic germ of identity – nor in social influences or circumstances of the sort Stephen seems to have in mind, but in everyday language itself, in the manners a writer adopts from, in order to relate to, his culture.

I have been focusing on the bachelors, but variants of "turn" turn up 310 times in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, including several instances in the well-known description of the view from Todgers's boardinghouse, a hallmark of discussions of Dickensian realism and anthropomorphism since at least the 1853 article, "Balzac and his Writing" in *The Westminster Review*. Dorothy Van Ghent made the "View from Todgers's" an iconographic

image of a certain variant of realism in her influential 1950 essay of that name, which describes with Lukác's Marxist nostalgia the ironic alienation inscribed in Dickens's persistent animations of matter and reifications of personages.[16] Van Ghent describes Dickens's world as a hallucinatory, demonic, or otherwise symptomatic expression of a culture in which things are monstrously inaccessible to, and yet threatening and impinging upon, people; Dickens's continual turning of spirit into matter intimates that substance has trumped significance, excess matter has displaced meaning (424). To an extent, the idiom of turns bolsters this perspective: atop Todgers's, a hypothetical observer "turning round" restlessly abides the panoramic view and, finally "after gazing, round him, quite scared, he turned back into Todgers's again" (*MC* 133–34). Inflections of the word *turn* modulate Dickens's dizzying cartography, comprising the meandering London streets and the misshapen buildings and trees they adjoin as well as the bewildered characters that perambulate them. Another hypothetical stranger looking for Todgers's suffers "resigned distraction . . . as he trod those devious mazes, and, giving him up for lost, went in and out and round about, and quietly turned back again" (131). The modern world seems to turn away from people.

As instable and rotatory as the "revolving," "crook-backed," and "askew" chimney-pots and other architectural elements (*MC* 134), then, are the personages who turn gravely and gayly, gray and insolent, over, round, around, back, against, from, toward, away, into, down, up, out, cold, pale, dark, crimson, and deeply red throughout the novel. Whether turning a key, turning their faces, turning on their heels, turning colors, turning their overflowing and languid eyes, or turning to another; whether suffering a turn, as in a shock, or taking a turn, as in a walk; whether turning out or returning, Dickens's characters relate to each other, themselves, and their environments in terms of the word *turn*. Turning is their principle form of mediation, their principle affect and attitude. *Pace* Van Ghent, then, I think the meaning – or value – evoked by this scene resides neither in the personages nor the objects by which the persons have been alienated, but rather in the persistent turning by which these categories interact, in the trope that keeps subjects and objects in flux. Still channeling Lukács, Van Ghent observes that the moral import of Dickens's "art" comes not from characters but from the "total aesthetic occasion" in which Dickens transposes "a great deal of 'inner life' . . . to other forms than that of character" (423); but "inner life" is an inadequate, specious synonym for "meaning," moral import, and aesthetics here, where the prose privileges figurative and flexible contact, exchange, and sinuous attachment far above

innerness. Nineteenth-century writers routinely insisted on recognizing these "other forms" as "character" because they did not restrict character to personages, because these other forms were modes of description expressly aligned with characterization, and because texts were expected to cultivate character in readers.

Like many nineteenth-century novelists, Dickens routinely foregrounds, even mocks the fundamental features of his more amiable and allegedly realistic characters by caricaturing them in variously disagreeable, morally and stylistically inadequate, or flat characters inhabiting the same novels. So Sairey Gamp, the tipsy midwife/nurse/mourner, exemplifies the penchant for turning in her ready adaptation to the condition of her clients but also in her "remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of [her] moist eye" (*MC* 303, cf. 308). Perhaps excepting only Sam Weller, Mrs. Gamp exceeds all of Dickens's characters in memorable malapropisms; and, among other idiosyncratic verbal tics, she makes a "familiar phrase" of "to turn and turn about; one off, one on," a phrase "of which she must regularly discharge herself" (729). "If you should turn at all faint," Mrs. Gamp promises to "soon rewive you" by turning: "Bite a person's thumbs, or turn their fingers the wrong way," she explains, "and they comes to, wonderful, Lord bless you!" (666). In diagnosing Sweedlepipe's brains to be "topjy turjey" (which is to say, topsy turvy), she slurs the title of Chapter 52, "In which the Tables are Turned, completely Upside down" (759). The explicit comedy of the dinner at Todgers's and Mrs. Gamp's inebriate idiom might invite us to take them merely as jokes instead of earnest, metacritical reflections on the art, affect, and epistemology of character and characterization. But I have been referring to them as parody because, as Carolyn Williams explains, melodramatic parody – whether silly, sentimental, or serious – commemorates and preserves established conventions even as it critiques them; parody, that is to say, indicates when specific generic conventions have become recognizable and usable as such, but without disabling them.[17]

The parody in the Todgers's scene and in Gamp's speech indicates that "a turn" had become so prevalent as to become recognizable to Dickens as a generic index of characterization. The manners of characterization became mannerisms in their excess. In other words, Gamp's drunken linguistic eccentricities, like those of many Victorian characters, only accentuate the quirkiness of common, sober discourse and ordinary behavior. Narrators and mundane characters alike use colloquialisms like Gamp's shorthand for convalescence, to "bring *him* round" (*MC* 440, emphasis in original); and, as I have said, everyone and everything in

Dickens's world turns and returns. Indeed, *Martin Chuzzlewit* includes an additional 315 instances of "returned," one of Dickens's favored speech tags, and 89 instances of "return," "returns," and "returning," such that the novel portrays reality as a process of parrying, exchanging, redoubling, and twisting, rather than as a fixed property or identity. As a speech tag, especially, "return" implies that dialogue is less an expression of interiority than of interaction, given that *turn* was slang for "actor." Dickensian conversation puts an emphasis on "verse." *Martin Chuzzlewit* includes a few inward turns, to be sure, but things also happen by turns and in turn. Events and people turn out one way or another. Characters suffer turns; follow turns of thought; turn incidents to account; and theatrically turn themselves every which way.

But as I have hinted with *Jane Eyre, turn* by no means belongs exclusively to *Martin Chuzzlewit* and its eccentrics. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1), Kit Nubbles is "by no means of a sentimental turn," Thomas Codlin has a "misanthropical turn of mind," and Sally Brass's mind is "of a strong and vigorous turn."[18] In *Great Expectations* (1860–61), just before being "turned upside down" by Magwitch and "long before the days of photographs," before the hegemony of mimetic correspondence and mass reproduction, Pip "unreasonably derived" his father and mother "from their tombstones": "The shape of the letters on my father's," he explains, "gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, '*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above*,' I draw a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly."[19] If mature Pip retroactively belittles his "childish" conclusion, the novel nevertheless offers it as a genuine insight in which *turn* links *character* as a typographical mark to *character* as personality: the scene intimates how readers can only conjure character from the turn of Dickens's inscriptions.

The first sentence of *David Copperfield* skeptically parodies the *Odyssey*, asking "Whether [David himself] shall turn out to be the hero of [his] own life" (9). And David's becoming "such a determined character" (*DC* 445) requires him "to turn the painful discipline of my younger days to account" (439). The capitalistic *Bildung* of this turning "to account" is prevalent and ambivalent in Victorian writing. It summarily reports coming to fruition, becoming, arriving, or maturing, but often in a mechanistic sense. In *Hard Times* (1854), for example, Mr. M'Choakumchild "and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been latterly turned, at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs."[20] *Character* here again carries the double valence of mass-produced typicality and utter individuality. On the one hand, that is to

say, Dickens evokes Carlyle's assertion in "Signs of the Times" (1829): "Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand . . . Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character";[21] on the other hand, he underscores – like Carlyle again – how the nostalgic ideal of a natural, un-mechanized human character nevertheless depends rather mechanically on the same idiom.[22]

George Eliot employs this mechanistic ambivalence in her markedly natural historical characterization of Tom and Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860):

> He was *one of those* lads that grow everywhere in England, – a lad with light-brown hair, cheeks of cream and roses, full lips, indeterminate nose and eyebrows – a physiognomy in which it seems impossible to discern anything but the *generic character* of boyhood; as different as possible from poor Maggie's phiz, which Nature seemed to have moulded and coloured with the most decided intention. . . . Under these average boyish physiognomies [Nature] seems to *turn off by the gross*, she conceals some of her most rigid, inflexible purposes, some of her most *unmodifiable characters*; and the dark-eyed, demonstrative, rebellious girl may after all *turn out* to be a passive being compared with this pink-and-white bit of masculinity with the indeterminate features.[23]

Here in explicitly natural historical terms of "modifiable characters," Eliot suggests that the indeterminate, generic, even ostensibly homogenous character, the figure that simultaneously marks identity and difference, might have more "purpose" than what appears to be the divergent individual. The genre of boys "turned out by the gross" can conceal more power than the Bildungsroman Maggies who "all turn out" as ostensibly unique individuals.

Industrial, individual, or both, character was deemed a function of processes of production, disclosure, and transformation, rather than an inherent property. For Samuel Smiles in *Character*, turning need never produce anything complete to produce character:

> We have spoken of work as a discipline: it is also an educator of character. Even work that produces no results, because it is work, is better than torpor – inasmuch as it educates faculty, and is thus preparatory to successful work. The habit of working teaches method. It compels economy of time, and the disposition of it with judicious forethought. And when the art of packing life with useful occupations is once acquired by practice, every minute will be turned to account; and leisure, when it comes, will be enjoyed with greater zest. (110)