DICKENS AS A LITERARY CRAFTSMAN

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I

DICKENS had a lifelong interest in language, and he did not regard it merely as a means to an end. This interest began to show itself in his childhood in a way not uncommon among schoolboys. Two of his schoolfellows later described his invention of a private language, formed by adding a group of sounds to every word used. It was the ambition of Dickens and his friends, when using this gibberish in the streets, to be mistaken for foreigners. This private language seems to have been similar to that used in a very different social environment by the children of the Mitford family and described by Jessica Mitford in Hons and Rebels.

Although Dickens wrote very little literary criticism, he remained all his life a critic of language, and introduced into his novels critical comments on the use of words, either in his own capacity of author or through the mouths of his characters. The most unexpected characters are upon occasion critics of language; Sam Weller is one of the chief. He is particularly fond of sardonically calling attention to hypocrisy or pretentiousness in the use of words. He invites Stiggins to have a drink:

"Wot's your usual tap, sir?" replied Sam.
"Oh, my dear young friend," replied Mr. Stiggins, "all taps is vanities"...
"Well," said Sam, "I des-say they may be, sir; but which is your partickler vanity? Vich vanity do you like the flavour on best, sir." (PP, chap. 45.)

When the footmen of Bath invite Sam to a convivial evening the invitation refers to "a friendly swarry, consisting of a boiled leg of mutton with the usual trimmings", and Sam's comment is a reasonable one:

"Vell," said Sam, "this is coming it rayther powerful, this is. I never heerd a biled leg o' mutton called a swarry afore. I wonder wot they'd call a roast one." (Chap. 37.)

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 8th of December 1965.
Tony Weller shares his son's interest in language, and the scene in which Tony helps Sam to write a letter to Mary gives them both scope. After arguing about the relative merits of the words "circumscribed" and "circumwented", they are at last able to reach agreement:

"Go on, Sammy."

"Feel myself ashamed and completely circumscribed in a dressin' of you, for you are a nice gal and nothin' but it."

"That's a werry pretty sentiment," said the elder Mr. Weller, removing his pipe to make way for the remark.

"Yes, I think it is rayther good," observed Sam, highly flattered. (Chap. 33.)

Sometimes criticism of an idiom is implicit in the reply made by one character to a remark in which the idiom occurs. When Bob Sawyer asks Mr. Pickwick where he hangs out, Mr. Pickwick replies that he is at present suspended at the George and Vulture (PP, chap 30). Mr. Pickwick is not given to satire, and we may therefore assume that the reply is an elderly man's unsuccessful attempt to adopt the slang idiom of his juniors.

One of the reasons for the wide appeal of Dickens is the pleasure that he takes in simple things, joined with the power of conveying this pleasure to the reader. Very often the effect is achieved simply by enumeration, but for this method to be effective it is necessary for the author to choose his list with care. For example, Rupert Brooke's The Great Lover strikes a sympathetic chord in most readers because the simple pleasures that the poet enumerates are pleasures which the reader has himself enjoyed, though he may not have thought much about them. When Maggy in Little Dorrit is describing the delights of being in hospital, she enumerates the attractions:

"Such beds there is there! Such lemonades! Such oranges! Such d'licious broth and wine! Such Chicking! Oh, ain't it a delightful place to go and stop at!" (Book I, chap. 9.)

Such unselfconscious pleasure in simple things is no doubt intended to reveal one aspect of Maggy's character, but it is a characteristic which the author himself shares. The last chapter of Pickwick Papers describes the house in which Mr. Pickwick is to spend his declining years, and the author carries the practice of rhapsodical enumeration even further than Maggy does:
Everything was so beautiful! The lawn in front, the garden behind, the miniature conservatory, the dining-room, the drawing-room, the bed-rooms, the smoking-room, and above all the study with its pictures and easy chairs, and odd cabinets, and queer tables, and books out of number, with a large cheerful window opening upon a pleasant lawn and commanding a pretty landscape, dotted here and there with little houses almost hidden by the trees; and then the curtains, and the carpets, and the chairs, and the sofas! Everything was so beautiful, so compact, so neat, and in such exquisite taste, said everybody, that there really was no deciding what to admire most. (Chap. 57.)

I have chosen this passage to illustrate Dickens's habit of enumeration not at its best but in its most pronounced form. The adjectives do not earn their keep. Such vague adjectives as "beautiful", "cheerful", "pleasant", and "pretty" tell us very little about the objects described. They simply make it clear that the author wishes to convey his own enthusiasm to the reader, and the effect is vague and sentimental. There is a similar example in the description of the Cheerybles' dinner-party at the close of Nicholas Nickleby. The description begins characteristically "Never was such a dinner as that, since the world began", and the effect is achieved simply by enumerating the guests, each with his or her appropriate adjective or pair of adjectives:

... Then there was Mrs. Nickleby, so grand and complacent; Madeline and Kate, so blushing and beautiful; Nicholas and Frank, so devoted and proud; and all four so silently and tremblingly happy; there was Newman, so subdued yet so overjoyed, and there were the twin Brothers so delighted and interchanging such looks, that the old servant stood transfixed behind his master's chair, and felt his eyes grow dim as they wandered round the table. (NN, chap. 63.)

It is not only pleasant ideas that Dickens can convey; he is even more successful in describing unattractive concepts, such as a bad smell. In Martin Chuzzlewit Montague Tigg is first introduced as something which smelt like several damp umbrellas, a barrel of beer, a cask of warm brandy-and-water, and a small parlour-full of stale tobacco smoke, mixed. (Chap. 4.)

The careful observation of detail is one of Dickens's most valuable qualities, and he is always ready to introduce a fanciful touch. Thus, Fanny Dorrit, overwhelmed by boredom and self-pity, steps on to the balcony after taking leave of Mr. Merdle:

Waters of vexation filled her eyes; and they had the effect of making the famous Mr. Merdle, in going down the street, appear to leap, and waltz, and gyrate, as if he were possessed by several Devils. (LD, Book II, chap. 24.)
One of Dickens's literary devices that is to be noticed in some of the passages already quoted is his readiness to use adjectives freely. As we have seen, the adjectives are often conventional, adding little to a description that a reader could not have imagined for himself, but they are sometimes very effective, giving a life-like picture in a very concise way. There is, for example, the guest at Mr. Perker's dinner party, who is described as "a small-eyed peremptory young gentleman" (PP, chap. 47). Sometimes the adjective is more fanciful, as in the description of the tract read by Arthur Clennam when a child, which "had a parenthesis in every other line with some such hiccupping reference as 2. Ep. Thess. c. iii. v. 6 & 7" (LD, Book I, chap. 3). Sometimes an adjective used by one of the characters in a novel is unexpected but amusing, as when Flora Finching describes her late husband's will, which had left her comfortably off, as "a beautiful will" (LD, Book I, chap. 13), or when the four pigs which look down the area of a New York boarding-house are described as "accidental" (MC, chap. 16).

It is not only single words that are effective. Critics sometimes speak of the elaborate circumlocution which is common in Dickens, and they say with truth that this is a form of humour that has not worn well. But circumlocution represents only one form of Dickensian humour, and that not the most effective. Dickens was a master of the concise phrase. Here are four examples from a single novel (Our Mutual Friend): Georgiana Podsnap is accompanied by "six feet one of discontented footman" (Book II, chap. 4); Twemlow is first introduced as "an innocent piece of dinner-furniture" (Book I, chap. 2); his cousin, Lord Snigsworth is described as having "gout in the temper" (Book II, chap. 3); and Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, unhappy with their newly-inherited wealth, are described as sitting after breakfast "a prey to prosperity" (Book I, chap. 15). Examples abound in all the novels. The description of Mrs. Clennam's house in Little Dorrit contains a number of expressive phrases: the deserted rooms have "settled down into a gloomy lethargy" and the furniture "hid in the rooms rather than furnished them" (Book I, chap. 5). A phrase sometimes derives its sting from its context. The phrase "of gentlemanly deportment" looks
harmless enough, but not when it is applied to the spinster nieces of old Martin Chuzzlewit (MC, chap. 4).

Dickens made frequent and effective use of similes, which are often elaborate and sustained. An example is the description of Mr. Pickwick falling asleep after dinner:

Like a gas lamp in the street, with the wind in the pipe, he had exhibited for a moment an unnatural brilliancy; then sunk so low as to be scarcely discernible; after a short interval he had burst out again, to enlighten for a moment, then flickered with an uncertain, staggering sort of light, and then gone out altogether. His head was sunk upon his bosom; and perpetual snoring, with a partial choke occasionally, were the only audible indications of the great man’s presence. (PP, chap. 2.)

Another, less elaborate, example from the same novel is the description of the end of the quarrel between Pickwick and Tupman:

The unwonted lines which momentary passion had ruled in Mr. Pickwick’s clear and open brow, gradually melted away, as his young friend spoke, like the marks of a black-lead pencil beneath the softening influence of India rubber. (Chap. 15.)

There is sometimes a special appropriateness in Dickensian similes. The similes used in the description of the schoolmistress Miss Peecher’s official residence are clearly suggested by her occupation, when the house is described as having “little windows like the eyes in needles, and little doors like the covers of school-books” (OMF, Book II, chap. 1).

Comparison does not always take the form of a simile. Silas Wegg’s loss of sleep when the mounds of dust are being cleared away is graphically described:

So continually broken was his rest through these means, that he led the life of having wagered to keep ten thousand dog-watches in ten thousand hours, and looked piteously upon himself as always getting up and yet never going to bed. So gaunt and haggard had he grown at last, that his wooden leg showed disproportionate, and presented a thriving appearance, in contrast with the rest of his plagued body, which might almost have been termed chubby. (OMF, Book IV, chap. 14.)

The head waiter at Bella Wilfer’s marriage dinner is described as “a solemn gentleman in black clothes and a white cravat, who looked much more like a clergyman than the clergyman, and seemed to have mounted a great deal higher in the church”. The comparison is sustained by the comment that when the
waiter discussed the wine with Bella's husband, he "bent his head as though stooping to the Papistical practice of receiving auricular confession ", and when a suggestion was made that did not meet his views, "his face became overcast and reproachful, as enjoining penance". It is in keeping with Dickens's habit of sustaining a joke that, on the strength of this comparison, the head waiter is afterwards described as "the supervising dignitary, the Archbishop of Greenwich" and "his Grace" (OMF, Book IV, chap. 4).

Not all the similes are sustained; some of the most striking are the briefest. Tony Weller is said to have "a hoarse voice, like some strange effort of ventriloquism" (PP, chap. 20). Tite Barnacle's house has "a little, dark area, like a damp waistcoat pocket" (LD, Book I, chap. 10). Mrs. Gowan's servant is "a smiling man like a reformed assassin" (LD, Book II, chap. 6).

Sometimes a simile is condensed into a metaphor or succession of metaphors. The props supporting Mrs. Clennam's half-ruined house are described as "gigantic crutches" and then as a "gymnasium for the neighbouring cats" (LD, Book I, chap. 3). Pancks is repeatedly spoken of as a steamer or tug. Lord Decimus Barnacle, standing in front of a painting of two cows, is described as making a third cow in the group (LD, Book II, chap. 12).

Metaphors and similes may be combined to present a series of images developing a single theme. Lord Lancaster Stiltstalking in Little Dorrit is described as a noble Refrigerator who "had iced several European courts in his time" with such success "that the very name of Englishman yet struck cold to the stomachs of foreigners who had the distinguished honour of remembering him, at a distance of a quarter of a century". He is described as having a ponderous white cravat, like a stiff snow-drift, and at a dinner party he "shaded the dinner, cooled the wines, chilled the gravy, and blighted the vegetables" (LD, Book I, chap. 26).

Dickens was fond of one particular type of comparison, which might be called the fanciful "as if". It generally takes the form of the invention of some improbable but amusing
explanation of the appearance or behaviour of one of the characters in a novel. Examples are very numerous. The following examples are only a selection from two of the novels:

In *Our Mutual Friend* Alfred Lammle at his wedding is said "to make a pasty sort of glitter, as if he were constructed for candlelight only, and had been let out into daylight by some grand mistake" (Book I, chap. 10). The police inspector, after discovering the identity of Rokesmith, indulges in "slow, heavy rubs of his hand across his forehead, as if he were ironing out the creases which his deep pondering made there" (Book IV, chap. 12). George Sampson is received by Mrs. Wilfer "as if admitted to the honour of assisting at a funeral in the family" (Book IV, chap. 16).

In *Little Dorrit* Edmund Sparkler's gondola pursues that of Fanny Dorrit "as if she were a fair smuggler and he a custom-house officer" (Book II, chap. 7). Mrs. General retires for the night frostily "as if she felt it necessary that the human imagination should be chilled into stone to prevent its following her" (Book II, chap. 15). Mr. Merdle stood up suddenly "as if he had been waiting in the interval for his legs, and they had just come" (Book II, chap. 16). When Flora visited Mr. Dorrit, "a singular combination of perfumes was diffused through the room, as if some brandy had been put by mistake in a lavender-water bottle, or as if some lavender-water had been put by mistake in a brandy-bottle" (Book II, chap. 17). A woman at the theatre where Fanny Dorrit was employed "was in such a tumbled condition altogether, that it seemed as if it would be an act of kindness to iron her" (Book I, chap. 20). The Sparklers' house was "at all times stuffed and close as if it had an incurable cold in its head" (Book II, chap. 24).

The fanciful comparison is not always introduced by "as if". When Lammle and his wife quarrelled, "they never addressed each other, but always some invisible presence that appeared to take a station about midway between them". Dickens adds the comment: "Perhaps the skeleton in the cupboard comes out to be talked to, on such domestic occasions?" (*OMF*, Book III, chap. 12).
The analogy is sometimes condensed into personification:

Mr. Casby lived in a street in Gray's Inn Road, which had set off from that thoroughfare with the intention of running at one heat down into the valley, and up again to the top of Pentonville Hill; but which had run itself out of breath, in twenty yards, and had stood still ever since. (LD, Book I, chap. 13.)

Dickens obtains some of his best effects by the use of contrast. In *Little Dorrit* the good-humoured volubility of Flora Finching is emphasized by contrast with the grim and hostile taciturnity of Mr. F's Aunt, and the two nearly always appear together. The members of the Barnacle clan do not all talk alike. There is a strong contrast between the dignified aloofness of Tite Barnacle and the slangy style of his young relative who describes the Circumlocution Office as a "hocus-pocus piece of machinery for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs" (Book I, chap. 10). In the course of less than a page this young man is described by a number of different adjectives all set in the same framework, a device which critics of the popular ballads call incremental repetition. He is "this airy young Barnacle", "this dashing young Barnacle", "this engaging young Barnacle", and "this sparkling young Barnacle". Nothing could be more colloquial and simple than his advice: "You had better take a lot of forms away with you. Give him a lot of forms."

Dickens was never afraid of repeating himself. A phrase, either descriptive or conversational, once associated with a particular character, will be repeated at intervals throughout a novel whenever that character is introduced. Within a single paragraph one word may be repeated again and again. For example, in the first chapter of *Little Dorrit* Dickens is trying to emphasize the heat of Marseilles in August. In the first ten lines of the novel the word "stared" occurs three times and the word "staring" seven times, and then after an intervening paragraph the repetition of "stare" and "staring" begins again. The intervening paragraph illustrates another variety of Dickensian repetition, not of words but of categories, resulting in an enumeration: "Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Genoese, Neapolitans, Venetians, Greeks, Turks, descendants from all the builders of Babel, come to trade at Marseilles, sought the shade alike." Having made it
sufficiently clear that it was a hot day, Dickens uses similar methods to introduce the idea of imprisonment, which is, of course, one of the main themes of the book:

A prison taint was on everything there. The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light, the imprisoned damps, the imprisoned men, were all deteriorated by confinement.

Many other examples of the repetition of a single word could be given from any of the novels. One further example must suffice:

Bradley Headstone, in his decent black coat and waistcoat, and decent white shirt, and decent formal black tie, and decent pantaloons of pepper and salt, with his decent silver watch in his pocket and its decent hair-guard round his neck, looked a thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty. (OMF, Book II, chap. 1.)

Sometimes the repetition takes a different form. Instead of the repetition of the same word many times in a few successive sentences, we find a longer unit which is repeated, often after a considerable interval. More than two hundred pages separate the following two passages, but the resemblance between them is so close that it is clear that the second is a deliberate echo of the first. The first passage is:

There were friends who seemed to be always coming and going across the Channel, on errands about the Bourse, and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three-quarters and seven-eighths. (OMF, Book II, chap. 4.)

and the second:

Fitting occasion made, Mrs. Lammle accordingly produced the most passable of those feverish, boastful, and indefinably loose gentlemen who were always lounging in and out of the City on questions of the Bourse and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three-quarters and seven-eighths. (Book III, chap. 5.)

There is another instance of the same sort of repetition, this time without the wide separation, in the passage, too long to quote, describing Mr Podsnap’s habits of thought, with the refrain “getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven” (OMF, Book I, chap. 11). In the passages that I have quoted, the repetition will seem to many readers to be overdone and heavy-handed, but no doubt one reason for the wide popularity of Dickens is that his craftsmanship can be so
easily detected. The fastidious reader may be repelled, but the reader of simpler tastes finds in such repetition the same sort of attraction as is to be found in the refrains of popular ballads.

Deliberate misquotation from some popular poem or song is a common source of humour in Dickens. It is not always certain whether the speaker is thought of as being conscious of the misquotation. When Silas Wegg, to the detriment of the metre, introduces the name of Mr. Boffin into the fragments of song that he quotes, he is, no doubt successfully, trying to strengthen their appeal to his unsophisticated hearer. Dick Swiveller deliberately adapts the words of Thomas Moore's famous poem to his own purposes when lamenting the loss of Sophy Wackles:

I never nursed a dear Gazelle, to glad me with its soft black eye, but when it came to know me well, and love me, it was sure to marry a market-gardener. (OCS, chap. 56.)

Here misquotation takes the form of condensation of a comparison.

Mr. Micawber, like many other Dickensian characters, uses deliberate misquotation with comic effect:

"My dear," said Mr. Micawber, "your papa was very well in his way, and Heaven forbid that I should disparage him. Take him for all in all, we ne'er shall—in short make the acquaintance probably of anyone else possessing, at his time of life, the same legs for gaiters, and able to read the same description of print, without spectacles." (DC, chap. 12.)

Anticlimax is achieved by the unexpected conclusion, which is very much longer than the five words needed to complete the quotation correctly. The same sort of misquotation is used by Mr. Mould, the undertaker in Martin Chuzzlewit: "We do good by stealth, and blush to have it mentioned in our little bills" (Chap. 19).

Sometimes it is the attribution rather than the wording of a quotation that is patently wrong, as with Captain Cuttle:

"Wal'r, my boy," replied the Captain, "in the Proverbs of Solomon you will find the following words, 'May we never want a friend in need nor a bottle to give him!' When found, make a note of." (DS, chap. 15.)

The more unsophisticated characters in Dickens show an almost medieval attitude towards literary sources: the mention of an authority enhances the importance of what is said, but
strict accuracy, either of quotation or of attribution, is not greatly valued.

We all have difficulty sometimes in remembering the exact words of a quotation, but Mrs. Skewton, in *Dombey and Son*, represents an extreme case:

Say, like those wicked Turks, there is no What’s-his-name but Thingummy and What-you-may-call-it is his prophet. (Chap. 27.)

II

From the first, Dickens has had detractors as well as enthusiastic admirers, and his detractors have made much of his faults of style. Forster devoted several pages of his *Life* to a defence of Dickens’s style against the attacks of Taine. Nothing is to be gained by denying the existence of faults, though some of the adverse criticism of Dickens is the result of judging him by irrelevant standards. There are fashions in literature, and a manner of writing that seems ordinary, or even praiseworthy, to a reader of one generation may seem execrable to a reader of the next. To say that a kind of writing that made a strong appeal to the Victorians is likely to jar on a reader of today is not necessarily to condemn it; it may simply mean that their nonsense does not suit our nonsense. Nevertheless, one has to admit that some of the characteristics of Dickens’s style are likely to lessen, rather than to increase, a twentieth-century reader’s enjoyment of his work.

There is, first of all, the lack of restraint. Dickens sometimes made too strong an appeal to the emotions. The result is that the reader is liable to feel that he is “piling it on” and to offer some resistance to the assault on his emotions of the kind represented by the last three words of the following paragraph describing Arthur Clennam’s imprisonment in the Marshalsea:

The autumn days went on, and Little Dorrit never came to the Marshalsea now, and went away without seeing him. No, no, no. (*LD*, Book II, chap. 34.)

Another of Dickens’s stylistic devices that tends to jar on a reader of today is apostrophe. When Mrs. General complains to Mr. Dorrit that his daughter Amy has no force of character, Dickens is not content to leave the reader to appreciate for himself what a foolish observation this is; he inserts an apostrophe
to Mrs. General to underline the absurdity of the criticism, making things harder for the reader by putting it into the mouth of Mr. Dorrit and then saying that it never occurred to him:

None? 0 Mrs. General, ask the Marshalsea stones and bars. O Mrs. General, ask the milliner who taught her to work, and the dancing-master who taught her sister to dance. O Mrs. General, Mrs. General, ask me, her father, what I owe to her; and hear my testimony touching the life of this slighted little creature, from her childhood up! No such adjuration entered Mr. Dorrit's head. (LD, Book II, chap. 5.)

The death of Jo in Bleak House provokes another very emotional apostrophe, this time addressed in the main to the readers of the book:

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (Chap. 47.)

One of the rather surprising effects of emotion on some writers is to make them write prose that can be scanned as if it were blank verse. There are many examples in The Old Curiosity Shop:

I have been sexton here, good fifty years. (Chap. 70.)

Why dost thou lie so idle there, dear Nell, when there are bright red berries out of doors, waiting for thee to pluck them. (Chap. 71.)

The use of blank verse is not confined to speeches; there are examples too in descriptive and narrative passages:

Kit often tried to catch the earliest glimpse of twinkling lights denoting their approach to some not distant town. (Chap. 70.)

The old church tower, clad in a ghostly garb. (Chap. 70.)

Kit tried to speak, and did pronounce some words. (Chap. 71.)

Occasional examples might be the result of accident, but in some of these examples it is clear that the metrical effect is the result of the choice of some slightly unidiomatic or archaic turn of phrase, like "not distant" for "nearby" and the elliptic phrase "good fifty years". Dickens did not set out to achieve lines of blank verse and, indeed, he fought against the habit. In sending Forster a set of proofs of The Battle of Life, he wrote:

If in going over the proofs you find the tendency to blank verse (I cannot help it, when I am very much in earnest) too strong, knock out a word's brains here and there. (Forster, V, vi.)
Many readers are repelled by Dickens's refusal to leave anything to the reader's imagination. Some authors are content to stand aside unobtrusively but Dickens was not of their number. It is always clear where his own sympathies lie. We soon realize, for example, that he likes Walter Gay and that he does not like Charlie Hexam. He gives the reader a lead by his choice of adjectives. Paul Dombey is "poor" or "little"; Walter Gay is "poor", and on one occasion Dickens really lets himself go in his refusal to allow the reader to form his own opinions by calling him "the generous, handsome, gallant-hearted youth" (DS, chap. 32). On the other hand, Blandois in Little Dorrit is said to have dropped whatever thin disguise he had worn and to have "faced it out, with a bare face, as the infamous wretch he was" (Book II, chap. 28), and Jonas Chuzzlewit is described in even stronger language:

Abject, crouching, and miserable, he was a greater degradation to the form he bore, than if he had been a loathsome wound from head to heel. (MC, chap. 38.)

For many readers such partisanship fails of its effect. Dickens is determined that his readers shall admire Mark Tapley, and probably most readers do find him an attractive character, but at least one of his admirers would like him even better if he were not quite so persistent in declaring his desire to acquire merit by being jolly in difficult circumstances.

The author's intervention sometimes leads to confusion between the opinions of the author and those of his characters. When Mr. Gregsbury in Nicholas Nickleby is explaining to Nicholas the sort of speech that he would be expected to prepare, he gives an example:

For instance, if any preposterous bill were brought forward, for giving poor grubbing devils of authors a right to their own property. . . . (Chap. 16.)

Here the adjective "preposterous" is Mr. Gregsbury's contribution, but in the rest of the quotation the speaker is clearly Charles Dickens, expressing his views on a subject that he had very much at heart. Again, in The Pickwick Papers Stiggins delivers "an edifying discourse" to the Weller family. The summary of this homily is followed by another précis of what Stiggins did not say, and here Dickens is unashamedly interposing his own views:
Mr. Stiggins did not desire his hearers to be upon their guard against those false prophets and wretched mockers of religion, who, without sense to expound its first doctrines, or hearts to feel its first principles, are more dangerous members of society than the common criminal. (Chap. 45.)

Many readers find such interventions unwelcome, regarding them as self-conscious interruptions of the illusion. The practice was more common in the Victorian novel than it is today, and the reader of Dickens has to be prepared to accept such remarks as: "But bless our editorial heart, what a long chapter we have been betrayed into" (PP, chap. 28).

At the end of The Pickwick Papers the author complains about the convention that a novel should conclude with an account of what happened to the various characters in the novel. But, though he protests, he complies:

In compliance with this custom—unquestionably a bad one—we subjoin a few biographical words. (Chap. 57.)

In exactly the same way Charles Reade was later to protest against the convention in the last chapter of The Cloister and the Hearth:

In accordance with a custom I despise, but have not the spirit to resist, I linger on the stage to pick up the smaller fragments of humanity I have scattered about.

Sometimes Dickens’s interest in language combines with his natural exuberance to make him indulge in linguistic word-play. Today puns are tolerated in a few specialized contexts, as in radio word games, but they are not as a rule indulged in by writers even of light fiction, except occasionally and defiantly. When we meet with puns in Dickens, we have to remember that he was a contemporary, though a younger one, of Thomas Hood, whose poems abound in puns. Dickens does not hesitate to hold up his narrative in order to insert a facetious parenthesis that is a mere play upon words. When Ben Allen asks Bob Sawyer how long his landlady’s bill has been running, the author interposes a comment of his own between the question and the reply:

A bill, by the bye, is the most extraordinary locomotive engine that the genius of man ever produced. It would keep on running during the longest lifetime, without ever once stopping of its own accord. (PP, chap. 32.)

In much the same way Mr. Pickwick soliloquizes on a fine morning at Dingley Dell:

"Who could continue to exist, where there are no cows but the cows on the
chimney-pots; nothing redolent of Pan but pan-tiles; no crop but stone-crop." (PP, chap. 7.)

Little can be said in defence of such puns, but there is a more sophisticated kind of word-play, in which we can still take pleasure today. This is the deliberate confusion between two quite different senses of the same word. It is the concern of the etymologist to show that "to draw one's salary" and "to draw one's sword" illustrate different uses of the same word; the reader receives a shock of amused surprise when Dickens deliberately substitutes an unexpected sense in his account of the holder of a sinecure who had died at his post "with his drawn salary in his hand, nobly defending it to the last extremity". (LD, Book I, chap. 17).

There are other figures of speech whose appeal is similar to that of the pun. Like puns, they can be regarded as playing with language and they are frowned upon by those who consider language a serious matter to be regarded only as a means to the expression of ideas. Such figures are to be found especially in the writings of young men, who are just becoming conscious of the enormous potentialities of language; they are more likely to be found in Love's Labour's Lost than in The Tempest. One of these figures is syllepsis. An example from The Pickwick Papers is often quoted: while at Bath Mr. Pickwick played at cards so badly that his partner, Miss Bolo, "rose from the table considerably agitated, and went straight home in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair" (Chap. 35). There are several other instances. For example, Bob Sawyer "threw off his green spectacles and his gravity together" (PP, chap. 50). When Mr. Pickwick had drunk too much cold punch after being pushed along in a wheelbarrow because he was unfit to walk, he "fell into the barrow, and fast asleep, simultaneously." (PP, chap. 19).

There are other devices which now seem facetious rather than funny. One of these is the unnecessary parenthesis. It shows a straining after comic effect when an author thinks it necessary to warn his readers against a misunderstanding of which no one but a fool would be guilty, as in the passage in The Pickwick Papers where Captain Boldwig is described as walking about his property "in company with a thick rattan stick with a
brass ferrule, and a gardener and a sub-gardener with meek faces, to whom (the gardeners, not the stick) Captain Boldwig gave his orders with all due grandeur and ferocity" (Chap. 19). Again, in *Nicholas Nickleby* Miss La Creevy is described as wearing a yellow turban when a coach arrives for Mrs. Nickleby and Kate. The author adds a parenthesis that it is the coach, and not the turban, that goes away with the two ladies and their luggage inside it. (Chap. 11).

III

One of the problems that every novelist must face is that he has to use the written language to represent the very much wider range of means of expression that is available to a speaker. Some novelists simply give up the attempt to portray spoken language realistically, and the result is that their characters "talk like a book". Young authors are especially liable to make their heroes talk in this way, and in the novels of Dickens Nicholas Nickleby is the chief offender. What makes it worse is that when a character talks like a book, he usually talks like a bad book. Some of Nicholas’s speeches are the sort of thing that would have gone over well with Vincent Crummles and his patrons. Three examples must suffice:

Exhausted as I am, and standing in no common need of rest. . . . (Chap. 15.)

For God’s sake, consider my deplorable condition. (Chap. 16.)

its hardest, coarsest toil were happiness to this. (Chap. 13.)

Elsewhere Dickens was more successful. When Doctor Marigold decides to write a book for his adopted daughter, he realizes the difficulty of giving a reader a true idea of spoken language:

I was aware that I couldn’t do myself justice. A man can’t write his eye (at least I don’t know how to), nor yet can a man write his voice, nor the rate of his talk, nor the quickness of his action, nor his general spicy way. But he can write his turns of speech, when he is a public speaker,—and indeed I have heard that he very often does, before he speaks ‘em. (*CS, Doctor Marigold*, chap. 1.)

Recent investigation of speech, assisted by the tape recording machine, has shown how great are the differences between speech and writing. We have come to realize that we speak much less grammatically than we think we do, or perhaps it would be better to say that speech has a grammar of its own.
Dickens realized how great was the difference. As a rule he makes no attempt at a completely realistic representation of spoken language, but occasionally, for his own and his readers' amusement, he records the sort of thing that people actually say rather than what they think they say. The waiter at the coffee-house in *Little Dorrit* provides an example:

"Beg pardon, sir", said a brisk waiter, rubbing the table. "Wish see bedroom?"
"Yes. I have just made up my mind to do it."
"Chaymaid!" cried the waiter. "Gelen box num seven wish see room!"
"Stay!" said Clennam, rousing himself. "I was not thinking of what I said; I answered mechanically. I am not going to sleep here. I am going home."
"Deed, sir? Chaymaid! Gelen box num seven, not go sleep here, gome." (Book I, chap. 3.)

The character in Dickens who makes most frequent use of disjointed phrases is Alfred Jingle, but he is not alone. The languid Mortimer Lightwood does the same when talking to Mr. Boffin, partly because such detached phrases are in keeping with his pose of gentlemanly fatigue and partly to conceal from Mr. Boffin the fact that he is making fun of him. Mr. Boffin describes how old Harmon had snatched off Mrs. Boffin's bonnet "in a manner that amounted to personal" and how she afterwards intercepted a blow, intended for her husband, which "dropped her". Lightwood's murmured comment is "Equal honour—Mrs. Boffin's head and heart". On being told that Mrs. Boffin had called her employer a flinty-hearted rascal, Lightwood's comment is: "Vigorous Saxon spirit—Mrs. Boffin's ancestors—bowmen—Agincourt and Cressy" (*OMF*, Book I, chap. 8).

In a passage in *Dombey and Son* we can see Walter Gay's rather formal speech disintegrating into detached phrases in a very life-like way when he realizes that he has an unsympathetic listener:

"but if you would allow them—accumulate—payment—advance—uncle—frugal, honourable, old man". (Chap. 10.)

One way of overcoming the shortcomings of the written language is to add descriptions of the way in which characters speak. Dickens does this fairly often. In *Bleak House* a speech by Conversation Kenge is followed by Esther Summerson's comment:
He appeared to enjoy beyond everything the sound of his own voice. I couldn’t wonder at that, for it was mellow and full, and gave great importance to every word he uttered. He listened to himself with obvious satisfaction, and sometimes gently beat time to his own music with his head, or rounded a sentence with his hand. I was very much impressed by him—even then, before I knew that he formed himself on the model of a great lord who was his client, and that he was generally called Conversation Kenge. (Chap. 3.)

Usually the description of a character’s way of speaking is briefer, but it is sometimes very convincing and contributes a good deal to the life-like portrayal of the character in question. The Cheeryble Brothers are described as having a very emphatic and earnest delivery and as speaking as though they had plums in their mouths (NN, chap. 35). Mrs. General is described as speaking “in her emotionless and expressionless manner” (LD, Book II, chap. 5). Edmund Sparkler, in reply to a remark of his wife’s, “was going to say ‘No?’ interrogatively but he saw his danger and said it assentingly” (LD, Book II, chap. 24). Several similar examples occur in Our Mutual Friend. The schoolmistress Miss Peecher addresses her favourite pupil “in a tunefully instructive voice” (Book II, chap. 11); when Rokesmith spoke to Riderhood, he did so “in a tone which seemed to leave some such words as ‘you dog,’ very distinctly understood”, and he went on “in a low voice, this time with a grim sort of admiration of him as a perfect piece of evil” (Book II, chap. 12); and Mrs. Wilfer is described as speaking “in her monotonous Act of Parliament tone” (Book IV, chap. 5) and “delivering a few remarks from the throne” (Book IV, chap. 16).

Dickens shows skill in the use of typographical devices to overcome some of the difficulties that inevitably arise when written language is used to represent the much wider range of devices that can be used by a speaker.

To indicate jerky speech he uses both hyphens and full-stops. When Silas Wegg is being given a lift in a donkey-cart on his way to Boffin’s Bower, we are told that “conversation was jolted out of him in a most dislocated state”. Hyphens are used to indicate the jerks and capitals to indicate the excessive emphasis which the jolting of the cart causes him to give to certain syllables: “Was-it-Ev-verajail?”, “And-why-did-they-
callitharm-Ony?”, “Do you know-Mist-Erboff-in?” (OMF, Book I, chap. 5).

A good example of the use of the full-stop to indicate jerky speech is provided by Miss Flite in Bleak House. Her sentences are usually short, but, even when they are not, they are split up by punctuation that is rhetorical rather than logical:

“I was a ward myself. I was not mad at that time”, curtseying low and smiling between every little sentence. “I had youth and hope...I believe, beauty. It matters very little now. Neither of the three served or saved me. I have the honour to attend Court regularly. With my documents. I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the Day of Judgment...” (Chap. 3.)

The same device is used in David Copperfield to represent the words of Peggotty speaking to David through a keyhole, “shooting in each broken little sentence in a convulsive little burst of its own”:

“Davy, dear. If I ain't been azackly as intimate with you. Lately, as I used to be. It ain't because I don't love you. Just as well and more, my pretty poppet. It's because I thought it better for you. And for some one else besides.” (Chap. 4.)

Commas are used to represent the ticking of a clock when Paul Dombey has been introduced to Doctor Blimber:

Grave as an organ was the Doctor's speech; and when he ceased, the great clock in the hall seemed (to Paul at least) to take him up, and to go on saying, “how, is, my, lit, tle, friend? how, is, my, lit, tle, friend?” over and over and over again. (DS, chap. 11.)

In his letters Dickens sometimes makes exuberant use of punctuation. His emotion, when he conveys the news that seventeen hundred copies of the Life of Grimaldi were sold in the first week requires thirty exclamation marks to express it (Forster, II, ii).

In contrast to this excessive punctuation, the long speeches of Flora Finching in Little Dorrit are under-punctuated. The author’s comment is that she is “running on with astonishing speed, and pointing her conversation with nothing but commas and very few of them” (Book I, chap. 13); the impression that she makes on Clennam is one of “disjointed volubility”. The lack of punctuation gives the effect of breathlessness and increases the inconsequential effect as her mind darts about from one parenthesis to another:
“Dear dear”, said Flora, “only to think of the changes at home Arthur—cannot overcome it, seems so natural. Mr Clennam far more proper—since you became familiar with the Chinese customs and language which I am persuaded you speak like a native if not better for you were always quick and clever though immensely difficult no doubt, I am sure the tea chests alone would kill me if I tried, such changes Arthur—I am doing it again, seems so natural, most improper—as no one could have believed, who could have ever imagined Mrs Finching when I can’t imagine it myself!” (Book I, chap. 13.)

Initial capitals are used to indicate over-emphatic speech. They are used, for example, to mark the pompous self-importance of Mr. Podsnap when trying to impress “the foreign gentleman” (OMF, Book I, chap. 11). They are used to represent the rapture with which Maggy in Little Dorrit describes the pleasures of being a patient in a hospital: “a Ev’nly place” (Book I, chap. 9), where it was possible to have “lots of Chicking” (Book I, chap. 24).

One feels that Dickens’s experience as a newspaper reporter had taught him that a comic effect can be achieved by turning a quite simple piece of direct speech into indirect speech. For example, Mrs. Micawber reports “that even the revengeful bootmaker had declared in open court that he bore him [i.e. Mr. Micawber] no malice, but that when money was owing to him he liked to be paid. He said he thought it was human nature” (DC, chap. 12). The use of indirect speech can provide examples of the polysyllabic humour for which Victorian novelists are so often condemned. When Mrs. Clennam, looking for the Marshalsea, antagonizes the crowd, we are told that they were “recommending an adjournment to Bedlam” (LD, Book II, chap. 31). There is a deliberate contrast here between the pedantic literary style of the indirect speech and the direct, forceful language that the crowd may be assumed to have actually used. In Martin Chuzzlewit we find a sentence in reported speech which shows the omniscient narrator speaking in the manner of Mr. Jinkins: “Oh, Todger’s could do it when it chose! Mind that” (Chap. 9). Another example occurs in Dombey and Son. The thoughts of Briggs, one of Dr. Blimber’s pupils, are described in reported speech that preserves many of the colloquial idioms that Briggs would have used:
After Briggs had got into bed, he lay awake for a long time, still bemoaning his analysis, and saying he knew it was all wrong, and they couldn't have analysed a murderer worse, and how would Doctor Blimber like it if his pocket-money depended on it? It was very easy, Briggs said, to make a galley-slave of a boy all the half-year, and then score him up idle; and to crib two dinners a-week out of his board, and then score him up greedy: but that wasn't going to be submitted to, he believed, was it? Oh! Ah! (Chap. 14.)

In *Little Dorrit* the turnkey at the Marshalsea, when asked whether the wives of debtors were shocked by their experiences, "gave it as the result of his experience that some of 'em was and some of 'em wasn't" (Book I, chap. 6). Since this is all reported speech, the use of the colloquial 'em and the false concord are strictly inappropriate, but the introduction of the turns of phrase that the turnkey would have used leads to a gain in realism and adds to the comic effect.

A longer example is the summary of the account which Plornish gives to Arthur Clennam of life in Bleeding Heart Yard, of which the following passage is a brief extract:

They was all hard up there, Mr. Plornish said, uncommon hard up, to be sure. Well, he couldn't say how it was; he didn't know as anybody could say how it was; all he know'd was, that so it was. When a man felt, on his own back and in his own belly, that poor he was, that man (Mr. Plornish gave it as his decided belief) know'd well that he was poor somehow or another, and you couldn't talk it out of him, no more than you could talk Beef into him. Then you see, some people as was better off said, and a good many such people lived pretty close up to the mark themselves if not beyond it so he'd heerd, that they was "improvident" (that was the favourite word) down the Yard. (*LD*, Book I, chap. 12.)

Dickens occasionally uses variations of spelling to represent unusual pronunciations, as when he writes "drayma" in a letter to Forster (Forster, II, i), but his mis-spellings are generally intended as a form of class dialect. Thackeray made frequent use of such mis-spellings in *The Yellowplush Papers* and elsewhere, and in doing so he was merely following a fashion that had been set by eighteenth-century novelists. Dickens makes use of mis-spellings in a way that is less easy to defend in recording the speech of his lower-class characters when the mis-spelling does not represent a vulgar pronunciation but is simply a more phonetic representation of the normal English pronunciation. Examples are "sed" for "said", "wos" for "was", and "aukshneer" for "auctioneer".
In speaking of the craftsmanship of Dickens, I have not been concerned primarily either to attack or to defend, but to describe. To point out the faults of style in Dickens is all too easy; in defending him against attack, some lovers of Dickens have overstated their case and have insulted the object of their affection by undiscriminating praise. I hope that I have said enough to show that Dickens, in spite of the speed at which he often worked, paid attention to details of style and took more than a passing interest in the language which he used.