

Alphabetic Dickens: An Aspect of His Transcriptive Imagination *

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One of the greatest joys and fascinations of reading Dickens lies in finding oneself in the midst of a world teeming with its vigorous inhabitants including inanimate objects. Dickens' is a rather noisy world where everything can talk. Even a trivial inanimate object can have a "life" of its own. Dickens literally inspires everything. The promiscuity of his imagination is such that his description blurs the ordinary delimitation between living characters and things. In his depiction, however, his "touch" sometimes goes even further, crossing the border between characters in his novels and the alphabetic letters of which they are composed. Characters can function as letters in his fictions; even a letter of the alphabet can have a "life" of its own. Through the exclusive analysis of those alphabetized characters and the characterized letters in Dickens, the present paper aims to demonstrate that this apparently animistic creation originally comes from the peculiarly mimetic faculty of his imagination.¹

In an article dealing with the actual, physical act of writing and writing as a metaphor in *Great Expectations*, Murray Baumgarten states that: "[t]he characters read each other as if they were alphabetic letters."ⁱⁱ What Baumgarten suggests about the novel, however, seems to be also true with other novels and writings of Dickens in that personal characters tend to function as if they were letters in circulation or written texts. I'd like to demonstrate this in two categories, according to the two antithetical aspects inherent in the nature of letters, i.e. the metaphorical transparency (a function of their mediacy), and their own characteristic properties (immediacy): (1) characters in Dickens read each other as mediating surfaces, and thereby see through each other; (2) they can be more im-mediately presented in the texts, exposing the individual or material properties of letters themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

The mediating gaze which sees through or "over sees" makes the Dickensian character function like letters do in an inscriptive system. In chapter 47 of *Great Expectations* Pip goes through a peculiar experience of being seen through, or seen over. Pip goes to see Mr.Wopsle act on the stage and notices, during the play, that he is being intently looked at by the actor: "[Mr.Wopsle] had a good deal of time on his hands. And I observed, with great surprise, that he devoted it to staring in my direction as if he were lost in amazement"(GE, 364). Later, in a casual conversation with Mr.Wopsle, it makes Pip aghast to find out that not only he was the object of the gaze but also he was sharing the experience with someone else: " ' I saw that you saw me. ' ' Saw you, Mr.Pip! ' "

he returned. ‘ Yes, of course I saw you. But who else was there? ’ ‘ Who else? ’ ”(GE, 364). Mr.Wopsle was actually looking at someone else through Pip. An implication in Mr.Wopsle’s remark is therefore, “You were not alone.” Even before he knew, he mediated Mr.Wopsle’s gaze at Compeyson right behind himself; his presence referred to that of Compeyson, working as an unconscious agent. The gaze also partially depersonalizes Pip, making him transparent, by looking through him as if he had no body.

Such gaze can also be “*detective*.” Suspecting hidden secrets or identities, it is natural that seeing through someone should often be involved in the subplots of identification in the novels. In chapter 29 of *Great Expectations* Pip suddenly has a singular sense of deja-vu in Estella’s company:

What *was* it that was borne in upon my mind when she stood still and looked attentively at me? Anything that I had seen in Miss Havisham? No. . . . I could not trace this to Miss

Havisham. I looked again, and though she was still looking at me, the suggestion was gone.

What *was* it? (GE, 224-25) [emphasis in the original]

Pip senses that the person of Estella refers to someone else, though he can’t find out who it is. Later in chapter 48 when his attention is drawn to a motion of Molly’s hands at Mr.Jaggers’, he does find out:

He dismissed [Molly], and she glided out of the room. But she remained before me, as plainly as if she were still there. I looked at those hands, I looked at those eyes, I looked at that flowing hair; and I compared them with other hands, other eyes, other hair, that I knew of, and with what those might be after twenty years of a brutal husband and a stormy life. I looked again at those hands and eyes of the housekeeper, and thought of the inexplicable feeling that had come over me. . . . I thought how the same feeling had come back when I saw a face looking at me, and a hand waving to me, from a stage-coach window. . . . I thought how one link of association had helped that identification in the theatre, and how such a link, wanting before, had been riveted for me now, when I had passed by a chance swift from Estella’s name to the fingers with their knitting action, and the attentive eyes. And I felt absolutely certain that

this woman was Estella's mother. (*GE*, 369-70)

It now turns out that the mother-child relationship has been mediatively presented all along. It was the glimpse of her mother that Pip caught in looking at Estella in chapter 29; when he saw Estella, he also partly saw her mother. This double gaze inevitably confers upon Estella the metaphorical transparency which is similar to that of letters. In the quoted passage from chapter 48 it is significant that Pip is looking at the two women at the same time, one referring to the other.

Obviously Pip was not the first to get hold of that gaze. Knowing what he does, Jaggers always sees Molly through Estella. A gaze like this can also be shared with readers of Dickens. For example, after chapter 13, Book 1 of *Our Mutual Friend*, which reveals that John Rokesmith and John Harmon are one and the same person, readers inevitably see John Harmon and John Rokesmith at the same time, by seeing the former through the latter. The same is true with Mr. Datchery in chapter 18 of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* when he makes his first appearance in the town of Cloisterham:

All this time Mr. Datchery had walked with his hat under his arm, and his white hair streaming. He had an odd momentary appearance upon him of having forgotten his hat, when Mr. Sapsea now touched it; and he clapped his hand up to his head as if with some vague expectation of finding another hat upon it. (*MED*, 213)

Without doubt Dickens is here suggesting the doubleness of Mr. Datchery. Just like Mr. Wopsle's question, "But who else was there?" or Magwitch's first warning to Pip, "Now, I ain't alone, as you may think I am. There's a young man hid with me,"^{iv} the passage tempts us to see through Mr. Datchery. And the repeated references to his white hair in chapter 22, the last chapter of the uncompleted novel, convince us that the person of "Mr. Datchery" is actually a mediating surface, constantly referring to someone else who, as a secret agent, has a hidden purpose of watching John Jasper. Likewise in *Bleak House* Tulkinghorn sees through proud Lady Deadlock, the former lover of Captain Hawdon who died as a poor law-writer and the mother of Esther Summerson.

As these examples show, this gaze, far from being innocent, can easily be implicated in a project of voyeuristic mastery over someone. *Great Expectations* is a novel about such projects which is deeply implicated in the mediacy, i.e. through-ness. The characters are used as apparatus for voyeuristic re-articulation of desires of other characters: Magwitch tries in vain to be a gentleman through Pip; Miss Havisham's vindictive scheme is to break the hearts of the male sex through Estella. What makes Pip's situation so problematic is mainly the problematic double nature of his

life which is akin to that of letters, namely, their individual properties (their self-sameness) and their referential agency (their metaphorical transparency): Pip thinks that he has been himself all the time and has his own desire for Estella; at the same time he has also desired what Magwitch desired as his mimetic agent. Therefore, Pip's shock to find out Magwitch's whole project is structurally similar to the one he had when he was informed by Mr. Wopsle that he had been with someone else. It is then a grotesque^v situation that Pip finds himself in: he gets horrified to learn that his desire, his expectations and all, in short, his life, has been secretly shared with someone he didn't expect. In other words, Pip is shocked to realize that he has been made metaphorically transparent before he knows so that Magwitch can see him through. Therefore, when Magwitch apparently takes delight in simply looking at Pip, saying "And now let me have a look at my gentleman agen"(GE, 315), he is actually looking at and looking through Pip at the same time.

This would illuminate why Magwitch requested Pip to "always bear the name of Pip"(GE, 130) as a necessary condition for the great expectations the latter was inheriting. Once Pip accepts the offer of the anonymous benefactor, his name "Pip" ceases to be exclusively his own. It is no longer his private property because Magwitch has paid for it. He has bought it in order that he can re-articulate himself through it. He re-articulated "Pip" so that henceforth Pip can not only be Pip himself but also conferred upon himself, in spite of his will, abstracted presence, like that of the letter "R," abbreviated name of Reginald Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*, which allows others to re-name him. In other words, Magwitch renamed Pip so that the life of Pip can be self-referential ("I want to be a gentleman"[GE, 120]) and mediating (for Magwitch) at the same time. Thus the name "Pip" has become a palimpsest, his life now half his own and half shared. Consequently Magwitch re-articulated the name of Pip in the sense of "the name of Jesus Christ" through re-articulating the name, Pip.

In fact the name has been put into circulation in a larger realm; readers can also re-read and re-articulate the whole novel through the name, Pip. In the chapter on *Great Expectations* of his *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks comments on it:

He is ever returned to a rereading of the unauthorized text of his self-given name, Pip. "Pip" sounded like a beginning, a seed. But, of course, when you reach the end of the name "Pip", you can return backward, and it is just the same: a repetitive text without variation or point of fixity, a return that leads to an unarrested shuttling back and forth. The name is in fact a palindrome. In the rereading of the palindrome the novel may offer its final comment on its expectative plot.^{vi}

What Brooks demonstrates here is reading the novel through its protagonist's name, which is also a metaphorical re-naming, or christening of the novel as "Pip." In this light the name "Pip" stands for both the phonetic identity of the protagonist and the structural identity of the novel. Brooks' argument that "Pip" being a palindrome contains another suggestion. Pip's narrative of the novel, *Great Expectations*, which begins with a confused, topsy-turvy prospect, is actually a retrospective re-articulation of his life. So that, through his 1st person narrative, the narrating Pip lives both forward and backward at the same time, making himself a living palindrome. This may possibly be true on the part of Dickens who might have lived, in his writing of the novel, through Pip. But, as Brooks' comment suggests, taking "Pip" as a palindrome leads us into a rather pessimistic conclusion that ultimately the text comes to its repetitive self-sameness and that Pip's prospect of re-articulation has been doomed to be unsuccessful and fictive from the outset, just as Pip's self-naming. It also means that the novel which is doubtlessly revisionary, with its rewritten ending, is not necessarily revisory. This may be yet another suggestion that an act of writing one's own life, or a self-referential narrative can make itself another grotesque quasi-retrograde like the "MOOR-EEFFOC" which peeps out in Dickens' reminiscence.^{vii} But when we make much of the visual properties of the letters "P-i-p," it is not a complete palindrome. In that case, however, it would be a perfect mark as the "T"-like sign for Orlick for the whole novel, which starts, as the name shows, as a story with a self-articulating, self-referential prospect but ends in a diminishing way in terms of self-fulfillment and mastery.

Another mediating scheme in *Great Expectations* comparable to that of Magwitch is Miss Havisham's vindictive plot to break the hearts of the male sex through Estella. Although both Pip and Estella are agents for their substitute parents, one of their greatest differences lies in that the latter is more sophisticated or accomplished as an apparatus, which makes her life all the more problematic and tragic. Estella is far more abstracted in the way letters are abstracted than Pip thinks, as she tells him that she has no heart.^{viii} She seems to be conscious of the metaphorical transparency imprinted in her by her adopted mother when she says: "I have not bestowed my tenderness anywhere. I have never had any such thing"(GE, 225). She knows herself that she is utterly transparent in terms of affection, which also implies her recognition of the mediacy allotted to her, a mediacy also shown in a way partially self-effacing and partially mechanical in her conversation with Pip:

‘ A carriage will have to be sent for, Estella. Will you rest here a little? ’

‘ Yes, I *am to* rest here a little, and I *am to* drink some tea, and you *are to* take care of me the while. ’

.....

‘ Where are you going to, at Richmond? ’ I asked Estella.

‘ I am going to live, ’ said she, ‘ at a great expense, with a lady there, who has the power or says she has of taking me about, and introducing me, and showing people to me and showing me to people. ’

‘ I suppose you will be glad of variety and admiration? ’

‘ Yes, I suppose so. ’

She answered so carelessly, that I said, ‘ *You speak of yourself as if you were some one else.* ’

‘ Where did you learn how I speak of others? . . . I must talk in my own way. . . . (GE, 251-52) [emphasis added]

The way she talks, though she calls it her own way, makes it plain that she is going through her scheduled engagements for someone else. She is there with her dazzling beauty, deliberately presented to the eyes of many, whereas all her invisible properties as her will, emotions, etc. are repressed, or figuratively made transparent. Then the best (or more accurately the worst) trickery of Miss Havisham’s plot lies in that it takes advantage of the problematic nature of letters, i.e. its transparent mediacy. It is both suitable and ironical that she is led to offer a mediatory service which would be an act of mediated love: “Can I only serve you, Pip, by serving your friend?”(GE, 376).

But the most problematic aspect of this mediacy, which is so prevailing in the novel, arises when the immediacy of an action is attributed to someone as its agent. In chapter 53, Pip, assaulted and captured by Orlick, learns that it was the latter who attacked Mrs.Gargery:

‘ Old Orlick’s a going to tell you somethink. It was you as did for your shrew sister. ’

.....

‘ It was you, villain, ’ said I.

‘ I tell you it was your doing I tell you it was done through you, ’ he retorted. . . . ‘ I come upon her from behind, as I come upon you to-night. I giv’ it her! But it warn’t Old Orlick as did it; it was you. . . . ’ (GE, 404-05) [emphasis added]

What is bewildering about Orlick’s remark is that it testifies to both the immediacy and the mediacy of the corporeal violence: he declares that it was none other than he himself that knocked down Pip’s

sister; at the same time he announces that he did it through Pip. The message that can be deduced from his words would be something as the following: “It was me, but it wasn’t me” or “It was me, but it was you,” which certifies the co-existence of incompatible possibilities. So if his words sound odd to us, it comes from the grotesque nature of this situation which contains both the corporeal immediacy and the metaphorical mediacy.

Two points can be pointed out here in terms of the analogy between the way characters relate to each other and the double nature of letters, i.e. their immediacy (visual properties) and mediacy (letting others pass through). Firstly what Orlick’s words “through you” suggest is that Pip has been made metaphorically transparent so that Orlick may attack Mrs.Gargery via him, using him as a transmitting apparatus of violence. Secondly, there is a peculiar likeness between what he claims and what is said to be a sign for him (the “T”-like figure in chapter 16), which also contains its mediacy (standing for Orlick) and immediacy (looking like a hammer). Then by saying as he does in the quoted passage, he is unconsciously testifying that the quasi-“T” is the true mark for himself.

“It was very odd, to see what old letters Charley’s young hand had made; they, so wrinkled, and shrivelled, and tottering; it, so plump and round”.^{ix} When Esther Summerson states thus in her bewilderment, we sense something particularly Dickensian in the way letters are personified. Likewise, when David Copperfield narrates his early experience of learning the alphabets, the recollection sounds more like a nostalgic reminiscence of old friends:

I can faintly remember learning the alphabet at [my
mother’s] knee. To this day, when I look upon the fat black
letters in the primer, the puzzling novelty of their shapes,
and the easy good-nature of O and Q and S, seem to present
themselves again and again before me as they used to do.
(*DC*, 53)

The penmanship for young David was not merely a visual and material experience, but it was also an encounter with a personality. What R.H.Horne calls “the first germ of a ‘ character ’ ” peeps out here.^x The individual properties of letters are observed as well as their materiality, for “the easy good-nature” sounds more suggestive of their character than just referring to the ease of copying. As David’s words, “seem to present themselves,” shows, those letters pop up, as it were, out of the pages of the primer each time he opens it. These encounters with animate letters in David’s primer and Charley’s handwriting suggest the continuity between the living characters and personified

letters in Dickens' novels.

In fact the Dickensian characters themselves are very much like intricate pictographs with elaborate decorations. Commenting on Dickens' characterization, Stefan Zweig says, "His characters are always nothing more than a sum of visible features in fact, but they are so sharply carved that they fit to each other perfectly and compose an excellent figure of mosaic."^{xi} This observation is not only adequate as a commentary on Dickens' characterization, but it also illuminates one peculiar aspect of his imagination: the image of a person can be created from some trivial characteristics of details. Sometimes it occurs in such a radically dramatic fashion that it *inspires* ("infuses with breath, life") in some original sense. One of such instances can be seen at the beginning of *Great Expectations* where alphabetical letters are literally infused with life and grow into images of living characters in the eyes of the narrator:

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, 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 drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. (*GE*, 1) [emphasis in the original]

Pip reads the inscriptions on the tombstones as letters at the very same time he sees them as characters. And it is from those minor visual characteristics of the inscribed letters that living persons are born, as it were. What happens here in Pip's gaze is essentially the same with what we witness in other scenes in Dickens' novels where alphabet letters or a piece of cursive markings relate immediately to some living person: Biddy's deciphering the quasi-"T" which consequently summons Orlick; Joe's forge-like literacy which achieves a phonetic self-articulation by picking up alphabets that constitute his name;^{xii} Boffin's quick demonstration of his knowledge in which he instantly takes out his name from a small cue, a letter B.^{xiii}

There seems to be in the Dickensian world a peculiar relationship between the visual markings (including letters and characters) and living characters. From time to time they are too close to each other, almost without any definite delimitation between them. What is the origin of this peculiarity? One possible answer to this comes from the days of his youth:

At any rate, to Ellis & Blackmore, attorneys, of Holborn Court, Gray's Inn, Charles Dickens, aged fifteen, went as a junior clerk in May 1827. He remained there until November 1828. Then, having worked very energetically in his spare time to acquire Gurney's system of shorthand, he left what he must have felt to be a dead-end job of petty duties . . . to become a freelance reporter.^{xiv}

He taught himself to be a proficient shorthand writer. According to Thomas Beard, "a lifelong intimate friend" of Dickens, "there never was such a shorthand writer."^{xv} The fact that he eagerly learned the system of shorthand greatly illuminates the peculiar aspect of his imagination we are dealing with, for it now shows us that the eyes of Pip as we have seen above are none other than those of a student of shorthand writing.

As for Dickens, learning the process of shorthand writing was to know how the trivial markings are amazingly related to the various ideas or tangible things. As an experience, it was to trace again and again the processes of transformation in which every scratch and dot on paper is turned into miscellaneous objects. He was repeatedly tracing all the while a system of imagination: he was unconsciously teaching himself how images can be formed or even arbitrarily created, of any visual mark, whether it may be a sign, a letter, or nothing more than a blot of ink. An episode of David's learning shorthand in *David Copperfield*, which is probably the real experience of Dickens himself, would be the best proof to this:

I bought an approved scheme of the noble art and mystery of Stenography(which cost me ten and sixpence); and plunged into a sea of perplexity that brought me, in a few weeks, to the confines of distraction. The changes that were rung upon dots, which *in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else, entirely different*; the wonderful vagaries that were played by circles; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks like flies' legs; the tremendous effects of a curve in a wrong place. . . . When I had groped my way, blindly, through these difficulties, and mastered the alphabet, which was an Egyptian Temple in itself, there then appeared a procession of new horrors, called arbitrary characters; the most despotical characters I have ever known; who

insisted, for instance, that a thing like the beginning of a cobweb, meant expectation, and that a pen-and-ink skyrocket stood for disadvantageous. (*DC*, 545) [emphasis added]

Probably this is the exactly same experience that nurtured Dickens' transcriptive imagination. It is quite natural that the influence of stenography on Dickens should be more easily and obviously acknowledged in the characters' experiences depicted in his novels, especially that of Pip reading the inscription on the tombstone or that of Biddy who quickly recognizes that the "T"-like sign represents Orlick. The words in the quotation, "in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else, entirely different," remind us of the episode of "BILL STUMPS, HIS MARK" in *The Pickwick Papers* where the fruitless anagrammatic struggle over an inscription makes a comical effect.^{xvi} They also suggest that stenography is a prosthetic system of articulation in which you learn to reify concepts into an embodied unit. In this light, it resembles the business of Mr. Venus, the articulator of human bones in *Our Mutual Friend*: even a slight misplacement can make a crucial alteration of the whole meaning, just as Silas Wegg feels uneasy because of his missing bone.

Apparently stenography greatly influenced, or rather, even oriented his imagination as a whole and, as a result, his descriptive patterns. The best commentary ever made on this matter stenography and Dickens, how the former influenced the latter would be that of Zweig who states that:

He had been, before his literary career, stenographer in Parliament and during that period he practiced at pressing the complicated into the summary, representing a word with a stroke and a sentence with short spirals. And then later he practiced a sort of literary shorthand of the reality, making a small sign stand for a description, distilling an essence of observation out of the miscellaneous facts.^{xvii}

Words "mak[ing] a small sign stand for a description" is an appropriate comment on Dickens' stenographic characterization, for his depictions reveal an inherent transcriptive nature which is apparent even in his public readings. Being an inimitable conjurer, Dickens, "by mere play of voice, for the gestures were comparatively sober, placed before you, on his imaginary stage, the men and women he had created."^{xviii}

Elaborating on the acuteness of Dickens' eye in the same essay, Zweig also points out, "And

this acuteness was further intensified through an utterly peculiar refraction of his gaze, which reflects the object not as an ordinary mirror does in its natural proportion, but rather as a concave mirror exaggerates its characteristics.”^{xix} We may call this a sort of deformation, with which all the inhabitants of the Dickensian world are baptized. It is inevitable to use this French word here, for the French “*déformation*” can mean some creation with peculiar form or expression, whereas its English equivalent “deformation” can only have a negative meaning, i.e. “to de-form”. Both of these, *déformation* and deformation take place in the world of Dickens: surely we encounter quite a few unforgettably adorable characters who are obviously hard to find in the real world because of their more or less exaggerated personalities; at the very same time we never fail to come across many unforgettably hideous characters who demonstrate that they are in some way or another, morally and physically crooked, obviously out of the norm. Strictly speaking, Dickens’ characterization, i.e. formation of characters, is *déformation* and deformation simultaneously, which means that it is intrinsically grotesque. And it is this *déformation* coupled with deformation inherent in Dickens’ imagination that has produced those grotesque Dickensian alphabets like, “T” (=Orlick), or “MOOR-EEFFOC” (=COFFEE-ROOM).

One significant characteristic of this *déformation* combined with deformation is that it often trespasses on the normally forbidden categories forbidden, as it were, by the law of verisimilitude of description. A tendency to diverge is intrinsic in Dickens as Zweig aptly observes, “Dickens always underlines the markings of his characters, he turns them from the objectivity toward exaggeration, toward caricature.”^{xx} Dickens’ imagination not only crosses the border of the objectivity but it also goes beyond the delimitation of any kind. In the world of his creation, the delimitation between normally incompatible categories such as animate/inanimate, human body/thing, man/animal, etc. is often loose and from time to time it can totally disappear. The best example of this promiscuity of his imagination can be seen in a short paragraph in *Little Dorrit* which depicts how a letter from Mr.Dorrit to Mr.Merdle looked, not what it said:

In his epistolary communication, as in his dialogues and discourses on the great question to which it related, Mr.Dorrit surrounded the subject with flourishes, as writing-masters embellish copy-books and ciphering-books: where the titles of the elementary rules of arithmetic diverge into swans, eagles, griffins, and other calligraphic recreations, and where the capital letters go out of their minds and bodies into ecstasies of pen and ink.
(*LD*, 600)

This passage fully demonstrates how pleurably grotesque and generative Dickensian *déformation* coupled with deformation, i.e. his characterization, can be. Although writing is essentially a process of alphabetization, or alphabetic encoding where everything is transposed into letters that are supposed to be transparent, here in the world of Dickens each letter of the alphabet seems to be conferred an uncommon opportunity to transcend such a boundary. Indeed the phrases “calligraphic recreations” and “ecstasies of pen and ink” may be applied to Dickens’ characterization in general. Note the expression, “diverge into swans, eagles, griffins, and other calligraphic recreations.” Diversion and (re)creation go together excellently in Dickens. The characteristic transition in his description which Zweig has pointed out with words “from (*aus*). . . toward (*ins*)” is here referred to as “diverge”. The alphabetic letters can’t stay as what they are: they grow out of themselves to exist as characters, and then they turn into living characters, i.e. miscellaneous living creatures. This recognition intimates that somebody or something in Dickens’ novel can be one thing and another at the same time, or go through a transitional process of change, which also suggests the potential grotesque in Dickens. Commenting on the idiosyncratic objects and characters in Dickens, John Carey states, “In a sense the wooden-legged men are at an intermediate stage of turning into wood, and with Silas Wegg the process has gone further.”^{xxi} So what the presence of grotesque condition of characters or objects in the Dickens-land suggests is that it is still in the process of being built up or developed. This seems to overlap, in essence, with what Sergei Eisenstein calls “plasticity” in his analysis of Dickens’ art. Having considered what makes Dickens (and cinema) so popular, he states, “Perhaps the secret lies in Dickens’ (as well as cinema’s) creation of an extraordinary plasticity. . . . The characters of Dickens are rounded with means as plastic and slightly exaggerated as are the screen heroes of today.”^{xxii} The “plasticity” denotes the promiscuity of Dickens’ imagination which, often as not, makes his descriptions traverse the boundary between one state of being and another.

If the transcriptive manner of creation is truly intrinsic in Dickens, it is not surprising that he should easily traverse the realm of performing art including public readings. It is in the person of Charles Dickens as a medium that the plasticity and the transcriptive creation meet. Dickens himself once remarked, “I believe I have a strong perception of character and oddity, and a natural power of reproducing in my own person what I have observed in others”.^{xxiii} Praising the mimetic talent of Dickens as a public reader, John Hollingshead makes an acute observation:

Every character in Mr. Dickens’s novels, drawn in the first instance from observation, must have been dramatically embodied acted over, so to speak, a hundred times in the

process of development and transference to the written page;
and the qualities of voice, nerve, and presence being
granted, Mr. Dickens merely passes over that ground, in the
face of a large and attentive audience, which he has often
passed over before in the undisturbed privacy of his study.^{xxiv}

In terms of characterization Dickens' creative writing was already transcriptive from the outset. It is easy for us to infer, as Hollingshead does, that the inhabitants of the Dickens' world, as we know in his novels, have all been transferred through the body of the author before they appear in the written pages.

The process of characterization Hollingshead depicts apparently resembles that of Jenny Wren's doll-making in *Our Mutual Friend* in that it encodes the corporeal individualities in a somewhat reductive, jotting-down-like manner. Likewise, Dickens presses "the complicated into the summary," as Zweig says, in depicting his characters. He alphabetizes living people, transferring them from the third dimension to the second, writing them down into a lower, i.e. more simply fabricated medium. Dickens' characterization, however, differs from Jenny's craftswomanship in that he becomes the medium of transcription himself in his "dramatic embodiment." As this term itself suggests the continuity between the personality and materiality in his creation, his physical and vocal plasticity enabled him to represent miscellaneous characters through himself. He turned himself into a living slate, i.e. the locus of transcription, where on one hand he developed his characters from the various features he saw in others and reduced them into the fixed patterns of description on the other: "character" *is* character, not a mere derivation.

In the world of Dickens virtually anything can possess drive to become something more than itself. And this drive toward transcendence is always realized through a radical embodiment or materialization which is inevitably grotesque. Dickens' "dramatic embodiment" is a physical transcription through which he elaborates fictional characters on one hand and inscribes literary episodes on himself on the other. Dickens' characterization therefore embraces both transcendence and materialization simultaneously, for he creates eminently unique Dickensian characters who belong to a fictional "tother world" through the mold of his corporeality. There is no boundary between personification and materialization in his characterization, for he built up (individualization) and wrote down (encoding) his characters at the same time.

Apparently the readers of Dickens are invited to learn a new reading in terms of the alphabets. Since Dickens' writing is originally a transcription, they are supposed to regard an alphabet not merely as itself, but also as a cursive marking which is inherently plastic and thereby always ready to turn into something more than itself. They need to see it through, as it were; they need to see it as a crystallization of some persona or individuality. Dickens' is an enchanted world where alphabets

may suddenly start to jump and dance, just as those “queer chairs danced . . . kicking up their legs, jumping over each other’s backs, and playing all kinds of antics”(PP, 183) before the eyes of Tom Smart in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens can make the letters “dramatically embodied,” making them jump and dance, as Zweig points out, commenting on the humor of Dickens, that “[t]he language turns a somersault.”^{xv} Small as they are, when they start to traverse the boundary of the alphabet in Dickens, it is the essence of his transcriptive characterization that we peep through them.

Note on the Edition

All references to the works of Charles Dickens in the present paper are to the Oxford University Press edition, published as *The Oxford*

Illustrated Dickens. Also the following abbreviations have been used:

PP *The Pickwick Papers*

DC *David Copperfield*

BH *Bleak House*

LD *Little Dorrit*

GH *Great Expectations*

OMF *Our Mutual Friend*

MED *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

Notes

ⁱ The second section of this paper is the revision of the essay,

“Ecstasies of Pen and Ink: The Matter-ness and Transformation of Words in Dickens’ Description” that I read at the 23rd annual Conference of The Japan Society of English Usage and Style, 10 June, 1994, at Tokai University, Hiratsuka, Kanagawa.

ⁱⁱ Murray Baumgarten, “Calligraphy and Code: Writing in *Great Expectations*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 11(1983) 61-72., 63. In this paper I’m expanding the meaning of his statement.

ⁱⁱⁱ In so far as they contain the two oppositional elements in themselves, both the alphabetized characters and the animated letters in Dickens belong to the “*grotesque*.” On this issue, the following book was considerably helpful. Stefanie Meier, *Animation and Mechanization in the Novels of Charles Dickens* (Zurich: Francke Verlag Bern, 1982).

^{iv} Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 3.

^v Presumably the essence of the “*grotesque*” is that it not only passes over the delimitation of the norm but, often as not, it can be one thing and another simultaneously. In this paper I’m using the word

“grotesque,” referring to this doubleness.

^{vi} Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 140.

^{vii} See John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* ed. Ernst Rhys (London: Chapman & Hall, 1874) , 36-7. Also see G.K.Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906) 47. Actually the well-known “MOOR-EEFFOC” itself is, just as Pip expresses his doubt about Orlick’s christian name, “a clear impossibility,” because what Dickens would have really seen through the windowpane is the completely illegible figure, “MOOR-EEFFOC”. Obviously he saw it and read it at the same time: he saw it as quasi-characters inscribed on the glass pane on one hand and tried to read it as letters on the other. The incompatibility of reading and seeing made the most grotesque effect, which made him unconsciously rearticulate and rewrite it. Therefore the “MOOR-EEFFOC” is, strictly speaking, a revisionary retrograde.

^{viii} See Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 224.

^{ix} Dickens, *Bleak House*, 427.

^x R.H.Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age* (London: Smith, Elder, 1844)

qtd. in W.J.Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965) 37.

^{xi} Stefan Zweig, *Drei Meister: Balzac, Dickens, Dostojewski* (1951; Frankfurt am Main: S.Fischer Verlag, 1982) 71. All English translations of Zweig in this paper are mine.

^{xii} Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 41.

^{xiii} Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 50.

^{xiv} Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1970) 63-64.

^{xv} Wilson, 77.

^{xvi} Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, 136-49.

^{xvii} Zweig, 69.

^{xviii} Frank T.Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Walter Scott, 1887) 124-25.

^{xix} Zweig, 69.

^{xx} Zweig, 69.

^{xxi} John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination*

(London: Faber & Faber, 1991) 102.

^{xxii} Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949) 208.

^{xxiii} John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* ed. J.W.T.Ley (London, 1928) 59. qtd. in Philip Collins, "Dickens' Public Readings: the Performer and the Novelist," *Studies in the Novel* 1(1969) 123.

^{xxiv} John Hollingshead, *Readings from the Works of Charles Dickens as Arranged and Read by Himself* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1907) qtd. in "Readings from Dickens," *The Dickensian* 3 (1907): 296.

^{xxv} Zweig, 80.

* *Studies in Liberal Arts and Sciences*, 32 (Science University of Tokyo, 1999) 57-76.