

## Dickens' Imagination and Animism : The Inanimate Objects Charged with Life (1)

Koji SAKIMURA

### I

The world of Dickens is characterized by the remarkable rendering of the people and objects in their liveliness. Dickens' liveliness is one thing that can never be neglected in considering his imaginative genius. In Dickens' world, inanimate objects, as well as human beings, are presented as having strong desires to express themselves. Animism with irresistible forces supports them to assert the existences of their own; they are given power to tell their minds, to explain their unique states of being, to join in the human activities to share the qualities of human beings, making up the unique world which is sometimes specifically called "the Dickens world." This peculiar feature is one thing which soon becomes familiar to the reader who has perused several of his books. Although it is not fair to say that animism is the dominant force in making his world full of life, it is important to pay close attention to this aspect of his imaginative power in order to get more insight into his imagination. The purpose of this paper is thus to outline the manifestations of animism in his works, giving as many illustrations as possible, and also to investigate some qualities of his imaginative power.

The best place to start is Dickens' own remark on the making of his characters, related by J. T. Field as follows:

The growing up of characters in his mind never lost for him a sense of the marvellous. "what an unfathomable mystery there is in it all!" he said one day. Taking up a wineglass, he continued: "Suppose I choose to call this a *character*, fancy it a man, endue it with certain qualities; and soon the fine filmy webs of thought, almost impalpable, coming from every direction, we know not whence, spin and weave about it, until it assumes form and beauty, and becomes instinct with life. (Collins, *Interviews & Recollections* 311-12)

Here we can clearly trace the original process of the making of his characters, roughly sketched though it is. It is important in this quotation to note that Dickens takes wineglass to illustrate his mode of characterization. A wineglass is an inanimate object, and there appears to be little correlation between it and a character in its full form. What is thus produced is not to be called a character although Dickens chooses to call it so. What he takes to be a character should be seen on the different plane from those of other writers. This is related with the fact that Dickens' characters are, most of all, flat. We can further see Dickens' tendency toward making use of an inanimate object as the kernel of his imaginative power in characterization. As has been mentioned, the kernel of Dickens' characterization seems irrelevant to the core of real human beings. To Dickens' imagination, a man can be a wineglass provided with human qualities; conversely a wineglass can be a man condensed into the typical shapes in nature. If we take our step, however, a little further into the peculiar mode of his characterization, we can see that it is almost equivalent to the mode of humanization of the inanimate nature —

animistic rendering of non-human existence.

Humanity melts into the non-human object, without any confrontation between the two. The inanimate claim their membership of humanity by suggesting the affinity with human beings; for example, shape, movement, and position.

Let us now look at how Dickens' imagination endues the inanimate object with certain qualities, turning them into a kind of imaginative creatures. To outline Dickens' use of animism, diverse examples should be taken from several of his works.

First of all, "Meditations in Monmouth-Street" in *Sketches by Boz* needs to be considered as the remarkable presentation of the imaginative process of animation. The story itself forms a metaphorical canvas cut out from the animism world: the street is called "the burial-place of the fashions"; the street is occupied by secondhand clothes stores that form "groves of the illustrious dead"; there is "a deceased coat," "a dead pair of trousers," "the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat." Everything is shown to have a potentiality to move of its own accord and to begin to live its own life. While we know that animistic force presented here is the product of Boz's imagination, we can hardly resist the strength of the force, so that we are thrown into the quaint world in which the second-hand clothes with the sorrows and hopes of their ex-owners are given vitality to live their own lives. The way in which those dead clothes come to life all of a sudden is beyond description. Boz indulges in

the speculations to which they give rise; ... endeavouring, from the shapes and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before our mind's eye ... until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes have suddenly found feet to fit them, and gone stumping down the street with a noise which has fairly awakened us from our pleasant reverie, and driven us slowly away, with a bewildered stare, an object of astonishment to the good people of Monmouth-street, and of no slight suspicion to the policemen at the opposite street corner. (75)

This passage clearly shows us Dickens' subtlety in representing imaginary forms into figures endowed with a force of existence. The inanimate objects "suddenly" take actions "of their own accord" to be accepted as living objects. Although we are told that all that is described is the vision produced by Boz's speculations, the description is made with such a skill as to force us to accept everything that is represented. Particularly to be noticed is this phrase: "with a noise which has fairly awakened us from our pleasant reverie. The noise which is itself a product of imagination is told to have awakened the narrator from the reverie. Here is the trick which adroitly switches the narrative from an imaginary level to a real level. The switch works with a speed and vividness that leaves us wondering if the visions have cut into the range of our existence and experience. One may cite further example of this trick from among others in the sketch: Boz has been looking on at "the little pantomime" of the imaginary personages whom he puts into the shoes and boots of the shop:

... to our unspeakable astonishment, we perceived that the whole of the characters, including a numerous *corps de ballet* of boots and shoes in the back-ground, into which we had been hastily thrusting as many feet as we could press into the service, were arranging

themselves in order for dancing .... (79)

What is amazing in this passage is that the man who conceives the imaginary figures is astonished by their unexpected manner of development. It is in fact difficult to see this in terms of technique in fantastic narrative. Dickens sometimes turns away from the secure position of realism and gives himself to what might be called supernaturalism, leaving the reader wondering if the visions are actually seen by himself. We can see here the step that Dickens takes further into the realm of fantasy, where the images of his imagination begin to get out of his control and to amaze their own creator. It is true nevertheless that the accuracy and the vividness of the description of the whole scene is produced by the hand of genius, and we can never regard them as the product of the mind obsessed by hallucinations. Supernaturalism is presented surely in the context of realism, underlining the fact that the figures are merely visions. We can see this in the frequent reference to his working at the fantastic images (e. g. "We ... beggan fitting visionary feet and legs into a cellar-board full of boots and shoes" [78] and — "we had been hastily thrusting [into the boots and shoes] as many feet as we could press into the service" in the displayed quotation above). Dickens is obviously conscious of his power of imagination; at the same time he is keenly responsive to the wonders of the images that appear before his mind's eye.

We can see "Meditation on Monmouth-Street" as a demonstration of the early process of making up characters mentioned above; and Boz makes up figures out of shoes and clothes here instead of a wineglass by furnishing them with certain qualities and charging them with life. A question arises, however, about what Dickens means by "character." Dickens says that he begins his imaginative creation by calling a wineglass a character and fancy it a man. Now if we look at the product of this method in his novels, we recognize that almost all his characters can not properly be called characters. There are many critics who suppose Dickens' characters should be seen on a different plane from others. G. H. Lewes deplores that Dickens substitutes mechanisms for minds, puppets for characters (65). E. M. Forster thinks that Dickens' characters are all flat, and are condensed into types (76). Edwin Muir categorizes Dickens' novels as "novels of characters" in which the characters "never change very much, through changing scenes, through the various modes of existence," and contrasts it with dramatic novels which show us "the characters changed by their interaction on one another" in the changeless scenes (60). Mr. Micawber in *David Copperfield*, for example, is remembered with his sanguinary character and his corpulent constitution as well as his favourite phrase "If anything will turn up ..."; and every time we meet him we do not change our view of him at all because he looks the same, and behaves and talks in the same way. As typical of Dickensian characters, he is not a person who is remembered with the full form of his characteristics. If the memorable characters are presented in such a manner, then even more condensed form of flatness is given to a mere walking-part because of the simplicity of his or her role; an example of this in the same novel is the second-hand clothes dealer whom David attempts to sell his coat; the force of his existence is summarized in the fearful cries "Gorro! Goroo!" and we remember him largely for his cries.

Dickens' own explanation (that was cited at the outset of this paper) about the process of his characterization leads us to see the reason why there is such a mechanicality and flatness in

Dickens' characters. He starts by charging the inanimate with qualities related with human beings or anything animated.

## II

What has been shown in the preceding section — the mechanicality and flatness of Dickens' characters — deserves a detailed consideration. Before going into the subject, however, we may now look more closely into the questions of (1) where his tendency toward animism comes from; (2) what is the manner in which Dickens observes the inanimate objects; and (3) what significance his remarkable observation has to his imaginative power particularly in respect to animism.

Where is the source of his tendency toward being fascinated by the force of animism in non-human shapes around him? We have an interesting evidence to show the origin of this facet of his imagination. In a psychological light "A Christmas Tree" exposes the child's mind almost rent by the fear of the irresistible force of the inanimate existence:

I look into my youngest Christmas recollections! All toys at first, I find. Up yonder, among the green holly and red berries, is the Tumbler with his hands in his pockets, who wouldn't lie down, but whenever he was put upon the floor, persisted in rolling his fat body about, until he rolled himself still, and brought those lobster eyes of his to bear upon me — when I affected to laugh very much, but in my heart of hearts was extremely doubtful of him ... (4-5)

As the author says at the outset of the quotation, this is a recollection of his childhood, in which toys — most familiar objects for children — are described to be like his fellow creatures. Let us look closely at these images. A toy has a volition of its own: the Tumbler "wouldn't lie down," and "persisted" in rolling his fat body about upon the floor. Then we have not only those obvious animism as cited just now, but also a texture in which the inanimate are called "he" or "she" instead of "it," "cardboard lady" or "cardboard man" instead of "paper doll," and "a creature" instead of "a thing." The child thinks the tumbler to be "a weak-minded person — though good-natured" (6). The sights of toys are reproduced in a whole picture in which the child viewing them has no choice but to admit them into the same plane as his.

One quality of Dickens' animism is that the inanimate objects once charged with life are often associated with fearfulness and ghastliness. "The frog with cobblers' wax on his tail ... was horrible" (4); when the cardboard man, being hung against the wall and pulled by a string, "got his legs round his neck ... he was ghastly" (5); "When did that dreadful Mask first look at me?" (5). The quality of animism is paradoxically enhanced by the child's own awareness of what those toys are really made of, and his refusal to take them entirely to be lifeless, that is, dead: "Nothing reconciled me to it [the Mask] .... Nor was it any satisfaction to be shown the Mask, and see that it was made of paper" (5). Thus one source of Dickens animism is the fear of death coming back to life. The key to this point is found in the following speculation:

... why was I so frightened that the sight of it is an era in my life? It is not a hideous visage in itself; it is even meant to be droll; why then were its stolid features so intolerable? ... Perhaps that fixed and set change coming over a real face, infused into my quickened heart

some remote suggestion and dread of the universal change that is to come on every face, and make it still? (5)

As often in Dickens, here the speculation which has a significance to be developed further stops short at the suggestion of some keen insights into the notion of death. It is noteworthy that the concepts and the images of death take an important part in Dickens' works, and they are described almost always as the cause of his instinctive and perpetual dread. In the quotation above it is clear that Dickens associates the blankness of the mask with the image of a dead man. What is most striking and important to him, however, is the irresistible force with which the mask with the death image on it influences the mind of the sensitive child. The mask obsesses the child:

The mere recollection of that fixed face, the mere knowledge of its existence anywhere, was sufficient to awake me in the night all perspiration and horror, with, "O I know it's coming! O the mask!" (5)

We must now consider the question of why the child is so dreaded with the image of death coming back to life. It is a difficult question to answer; but at least we may suppose that the inanimate objects which become suddenly animated oblige us to take away the line between death and life. We live — or we suppose that we live — in the world where death is pushed back to the realm of death. In the world of animism, however, dead things suddenly come to life on the premise that there is no distinct line between death and life. This is really a ghastly world, because the premise equally admits that life can fall into the realm of death at any time. The interaction of death and life seems to be one major theme in Dickens novels, especially in his later years. (One remarkable manifestation of this is *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Doctor Manette is shown to be recalled to life from the state of living corpse, but always to be in danger of turning back to be a ruined man.)

"A Christmas Tree" is a beautiful sketch which describes the memory of the childhood fantasy mixed with fear — the fear of the inanimate force latent in any object simulating human shapes. They are described by the adult author, and it is obvious that it is a remembered images which those toys impressed upon the child's mind, and still continue to impress upon his adult's mind.

Children's general dread of the inanimate objects and their animistic associations are natural in the development of their minds.<sup>1</sup> What is not natural is that Dickens as an intelligent adult man is still fascinated with animistic observation of his surroundings. It can be seen as abnormal sometimes. As early as 1846, we read in an article in *Blackwood's Magazine*:

What I admire most ... is your fine feeling of humanity — the instinct, as it were, and dumb life which you manages to extract from inanimate objects as well as from articulately-speaking men. Your very furniture has a kind of automatic life; you can make an old chest of drawers wink waggishly from the corner, and a boot-jack in your hands becomes a fellow of infinite fancy. This is all very pleasant and delightful; though I think, upon the whole, you give us a little too much of it, for I cannot fancy myself quite comfortable in a room with every article of the furniture maintainining a sort of espionage upon my doings. (W. E. Aytoun, "Advice to an Intending Serialist"; (Collins, *Critical Heritage* 209)

No one may deny that Dickens gives us a little too much of animism ; but in fact his animistic description is one thing which greatly contributes to the making of the Dickens world, especially in respect to its quality of humanism, warmth and liveliness. Animism is the effort of extracting anything related with the physical and emotional qualities of human beings. Examples to illustrate this abound throughout his novels. One remarkable example is *A Christmas Carol* in which joys of human life are instantly reflected in the animistic description of the Christmas market :

The poulterers' shops were still half open, and the fruiterers' were radiant in their glory. There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish Friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe. (41)

What we see in this quotation is an abundance of life, and Dickens here endeavours to represent anything suggestive of warm-hearted feeling essential to human beings. Thus the chestnuts are compared to the waistcoats of jolly old gentleman ; Spanish Onions, likewise compared to Spanish Friars, are given wanton slyness and dare to wink at the girls. Here is Dickens' animism at its best ; and if the final purpose of the book is to make the artistic description of happiness, which sometimes becomes, as G. K. Chesterton thought, an impossible job (105-6), Dickens' rendering of happiness in verbal art is thought to be successful mainly because his observation is not toward human mind, psychology of happiness, but toward the surrounding objects which reflect the happiness of a happy man.

The Christmas happiness shown in Dickens' works is what has attracted the readers over a century ; and it is with the Santa Claus image that they often associate the novelist. It is worth noting the manner in which animism contributes to the representation of Scrooges' turning suddenly into a good man in Christmas happiness. In fact the atmosphere that surrounds him has the evocation which steeps him irresistibly in the unique world — this is "the Dickens world" — full of vivacity and warmheartedness inducing him to share those feelings with the world round him.

We are aware, however, that the Christmas image is not Dickens' only association, and we may now turn a while to have a glance at that grotesque side of Dickens' imagination because this is an important facet of some of his works. Examples are again numerous, and later we shall see to some extent a set of symbolic use of animism in dreary and grotesque manner in *Little Dorrit*. We may cite here a notable one from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which Mr. Fips' office is portrayed with a touch of quaintness and grotesqueness :

A great, black, sprawling splash upon the floor in one corner, as if some old clerk had cut his throat there, years ago, and had let out ink instead of blood. (610)

It should be noted that this is not merely a fancy but that it forms part of the feelings of the surroundings in Fips' office, thus contributing to the plot of the story — in fact the grotesque images of the inanimate associated with human bodies are themselves the events which put the plot forward. Randolph Quirk points out the choric effect of the expressiveness of the inanimate<sup>2</sup> ; and we must note in this connection that often the effects are sinister ones. Consider,

for example, the reflection of Time's heartless recording of the life of Paul on his death-bed upon the ticking of the clock, repeating Dr. Blimber's greeting, "how, is my, lit, tle, friend? how, is my, lit, tle, friend?" (*Dombey and Son* 145).

Priscilla Gibson points out the preposterousness of Dickens' plot, saying that "in creating plot, Dickens was more often than not carried away by the shaping of action for its own sake. He was not *primarily* interested in the relation between character and action, but attempted to patch up these inconsistencies later .... We can detect this confusion in aim, and consequent weakness in plotting, by Dickens's frequent use of animism to supply the motivation for his actions" (286). What she says may be applied particularly to his use of "animism" for "choric effect" (in Quirk's term); To take an example, Chapter xxix of *David Copperfield* closes with "Never more, oh God forgive you, Steerforth! to touch that passive hand in love and friendship. Never, never more!" (437) making a hint on Steerforth's treachery in the future, and the evocation in the exclamation is made resounding later in the novel by the animation of "the great voice of the sea with its eternal 'never more'" implying the unhappiness of Emily unable to be redeemed (670).

Animism is most vivid and evocative in the representation of sinister feelings. In Dickens' "dark" novels we find animism almost always in the presentation of the key images related with the themes of the novels. In *Hard Times* the smoke coming out of the factory-chimneys are represented as "interminable serpents" which "trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled"; and "the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness" (*Hard Times* 23). The fogs that dominate the opening scene of *Bleak House* is well-known, and the sinister impression of the whole scene is the result of animistic force, symbiosing the fruitless effort of the people concerned with the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce and the hopelessness of the workings of the Court. As the attack against the English society comes to be the main theme in his later years, Dickens' use of animism becomes more complex and subtle. The most remarkable example of this can be found no doubt in *Little Dorrit* — the whole scenes that lie before Arthur Clennam in his gloomy travel to his home in Book I, Chapter iii: the church bell is heard is heard by the man as sounding "Come to church, Come to church, Come to church!" "urging the populace in a voluble manner," but the bell soon "became aware" of the scantiness of the congregation, and sank "in low spirit" clinging, "They won't come, They won't come, They won't come!" (29). The fiery jets of a lamp sprang up under lamplighter's touch, and seemed "astonished at being suffered to introduce any show of brightness into such a dismal scene" (30). Many years ago, Arthur's old house "had it in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crutches" (31). These major evocations are reinforced by the minor effects of animated objects in the surroundings: "ten thousand responsible houses surrounded him, frowning ... heavily on the streets they composed" (28). It is "wet umbrellas" — not pedestrians with umbrellas — that began to appear when it began to rain (30). "A wretched little bill, FOUND DROWNED, was weeping on the wet wall" (31). A table is "maimed," a wardrobe "crippled," and so on (38). All these things merge into the whole force of the scene to the extent where it seems that inanimate objects, once animated, begin to lead their own lives in the fiction. Inanimate objects connected with human activities seem to

project themselves to the foreground as if to assert their own humanity. In fact their animation *is* an event which puts the scene into motion, and this is to compensate Dickens' weakness in realistic plot. It is true, furthermore, that the touch of animation is sometimes employed to give a symbolic effect — one can of course easily interpret the propped old house of Arthur's as the symbol of English society (31): the garret bed-room and the worn-out furniture imply a prison and its wretched prisoners, which seem directly related with the novel's theme (37-38); the ominous sense of evils coupled with the hero's grave dark mood dominates all that is observed, and shadows his memory of the miserable childhood.

(The end of Part One)

### Note

1 Animism in childhood is much discussed by the psychologist Jean Piaget. See, for example, *The Child's Conception of Physical Causality*.

2 In his discussion of Dickens' language, Quirk says that "in some novels [of his], the expressiveness of the inanimate works with a powerful choric effect through recurrent symbols" (13).

### Works Cited

- Aytoun, W. E. "Advice to an Intending Serialist." *Blackwood's Magazine*. 60 (1846): 590-605. Rpt. in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Philip Collins. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971. 207-211.
- Chesterton, G. K. *Appreciations and Criticism of the Works of Charles Dickens*. London: L. M. Dent & Sons, 1911.
- Collins, Philip, ed. *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections*. 2 Vols. London Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981.
- Dickens, Charles. *Christmas Books*. The Oxford Illustrated Dickens. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1954. (All the works of Dickens that follow are to this edition.)
- ..... *Christmas Stories*. 1956.
- ..... *David Copperfield*. 1948.
- ..... *Dombey and Son*. 1950.
- ..... *Great Expectations*. 1953.
- ..... *Hard Times*. 1955.
- ..... *Little Dorrit*. 1953.
- ..... *Martin Chuzzlewit*. 1951.
- ..... *Sketches by Boz*. 1957.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. 1927. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962.
- Gibson, Priscilla. "Dickens's Use of Animism." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 7 (1953). 283-291.
- Lewes, George Henry. "Dickens in Relation to Criticism." *The Dickens Critics*. Ed. George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961. 54-74.
- Muir, Edwin. *The Structure of the Novel*. London: Hogarth Press, 1967.
- Piaget, Jean. *The Child's Conception of Physical Causality*. Translated by Marjorie Gabain. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930.
- Quirk, Randolph. "Charles Dickens, Linguist." *The Linguist and the English Language*. Edward Arnold: London, 1971. 1-36.