

Daniel Tyler, ed. *Dickens's Style*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-107-02843-2. Price: US\$85.50.

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“Dickens looks at the world aslant,” Daniel Tyler writes in the “Introduction” to this thoroughly interesting collection of essays, “and his innovative, narrative style responds to and enables that vision” (1). But Tyler also suggests that critics have traditionally looked at Charles Dickens’s style aslant: Dickens’s achievement as a “great prose stylist” is obscured by our association of his style with a caricature of his style. The adjective “Dickensian” certainly conjures up images of, variously, squalor, orphaned children, and Christmas. “Dickensian” has almost as predictable associations when applied to style: exaggeration; repetition and anaphora; the performative nature or orality of his prose (often attributed to both his early life as a parliamentary reporter and his life-long passion for the theater); the over-use of blank verse; catachresis, such as in the anthropomorphism of inanimate objects; and as one famous critic on Dickensian style, George Orwell, noted, the “unnecessary detail.” Tyler suggests that our undervaluing of Dickens’s style is enabled in part by other critical tendencies, such as seeing style as “an end in itself, cut off from matters of plot and theme and from the deepest interests and values of the fiction” (1). This collection’s fine, carefully-argued treatments of Dickens’s style provide a new way to think about not only what we have long known about Dickensian style, but also about what we missed in looking at the adjective rather than

the artist. Tyler's purpose is not to swing to the other side—Dickens is subtle! restrained!—but rather that a careful attention to style as generative of meaning enables a more nuanced understanding of Dickens's craftsmanship.

Dickens, as the editor of a weekly journal for the final 20 years of his life, wanted each installment of that journal to hang together. Tyler's diverse yet cohesive collection of essays would have made Dickens the editor proud. Several of the essays raise larger questions about the nature of style. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst explains style as "a process of individuation, a unique signature of personality" (79). John Bowen explains style as something characterized by a tension between "literary singularity, particular moments of felicity and grace in writing" and "identifiable structures of repetition and regularity, the signs of a particular authorial thumbprint" (26). Helen Small, borrowing terms from Richard Wollheim's work on painting, explores the tension between style and "signature," a limited conception of style which becomes the kind of "list of characteristic, predictable stylistic features" we see associated with the "Dickensian" (254). These essays are also united by an unintentionally shared bibliography. Read as a whole, one sees the clear outlines of a longstanding consideration of Dickens's style, from Dickens's young men (such as G. A. Sala and Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald) to G. K. Chesterton and George Orwell through to works such as Garrett Stewart's *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination* (1974) and John Kucich's *Excess and Restraint in the Novels of Charles Dickens* (1982). While each essay looks at a stylistic feature, from rhythm to exaggeration to syllepsis, it is interesting to note that certain moments in the Dickens canon seem particularly rich for stylistic analysis; a number of essays explore the near-death of Rogue Riderhood in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Dickens's relatively

late “Uncommercial Traveller” articles initially published in *All the Year Round* (1859-69), and what seems to be a kind of authorial self-examination in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the novel left uncompleted by his death in 1870.

In a chapter on Dickens’s umbrellas, Bowen argues that “umbrellas have a close affinity with the question of style” (27). Working through Jacques Derrida’s “enigmatic meditation on the question of style” that is *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, Bowen claims that umbrellas provide the stage for a theatre “of absence and presence” (28). Bowen’s philosophical exploration provides, it must be said, an umbrella for a tight close reading that shows how style, like umbrellas, is used in Dickens to “point or attack on the one hand and to ward things off on the other in three particular ways”: anxieties about “class difference and criminality,” about “masculinity and sexual difference” and about “identity, property and the law more generally” (32). Bowen considers, of course, *Martin Chuzzlewit*’s Mrs. Gamp (1844), who lent her name to a kind of umbrella, and a piece written during the scandal surrounding the breakup of Dickens’s marriage, “Please to Leave Your Umbrella” in *Household Words* in May 1858. “The umbrella,” Bowen explains, is “the text’s central figure for what is most proper to the subjectivity of the narrating self and a privileged way ... to understand its mode of narration and style” (41).

Structure is an aspect of style and a number of the essays explore how time is used by Dickens to structure his narratives. As with Bowen’s umbrellas, Matthew Bevis’s essay uses clocks as a lens into style, or rather into a style that struggles with what it is that clocks do to narrative. Pace E. P. Thompson, Bevis explains that “the clock and the watch help to shape and regulate the rhythms of nineteenth-century industrial life” (52). Bevis’s reading of *Great Expectations* (1861) links the clicking, clock noises associated

with Magwitch and the “systematically dated and clocked” description of the plan for his escape to the text’s simultaneous yearning for escape. The “insights and evasions” of Dickens’s style reveal the “fantasies that style can encourage, and the ones it may need to rethink” (63). An emphasis on how style manifests ambivalence toward the structuring influence of time is shared by Clare Pettitt’s essay on “the historical present.” Pettitt reads the goblins in *The Chimes* (1844) as “literally enact[ing] Dickens’s stylistic struggle to find a position from which to bring the past and present into a meaningful synthesis” (119).

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes a similar ambivalence in Dickens’s rhythms. He suggests that in *Bleak House* (1853), for example, Dickens’s language “tends to settle into blank verse precisely at the moments when Dickens is most concerned with putting things historically and ethically into perspective” (84), such as in Chapter 47, which reads “The light is come upon the dark benighted way.” In *David Copperfield* (1850), however, “rhythms come and go [as] they carry the narrator’s sense that while a pattern may exist it has slipped from his grasp” (82). Tyler’s essay, “Spectres of style,” connects Dickensian catachresis with his career-long interest in the ghost story. Tyler’s chapter looks primarily at the Christmas books as “parables of the imagination” (106), showing how these ghost stories “are intrinsically predisposed towards dramatizing, more or less allegorically, the power of the creative imagination and especially Dickens’s style itself” (101).

Two essays take the excessive style argument head on. Rebekah Scott’s “Snarling Charles” paradoxically examines “restraint as a defining feature of Dickens’s ‘Englishness’” (177). She looks at “tones of masculine gruffness or bluntness” (a.k.a. the “growl/snarl” (191)) and coins “the aural grotesque” as a kind of “semi- or even the *sub-*

literate” language that deconstructs boundaries of high/low and human/animal (177). Language itself registers Dickens’s thematic concerns about the bestial nature that lies barely concealed beneath the surface of man (191). Small’s concluding chapter dispenses with style, or rather looks at how Dickens, for all the famed excessiveness, yearns toward “plain style” (253). In her reading of Dickens’s final novel, *Drood*, Small bears out the collection’s claims that style is both about the outward effects of language as well as about the deeper meaning. She explains that “the sense of dislocation in *Edwin Drood* is more than an effect of style, or of style reflecting upon itself: it is also a principle of plot and psychology” (265). Garrett Stewart’s essay looks at “Dickens’s rogue glyphs” which he defines as “the audiovisual traces of Dickens’s syntactically flexed and uniquely oralised writing” (232). Focusing on the figure of syllepsis and its “typical collision of abstract and concrete” (234), Stewart looks incredibly closely at Rogue Riderhood’s near-death by drowning. Stewart sees in this scene the “human subject’s *being in language*” (235) and argues that “syllepsis is the Dickensian trope of tropes, in that it turns characters not into people but into embodied meaning” (243).

Dickens’s Style provides a compelling argument why such a collection of essays needs to exist. “It is often assumed,” Tyler writes, “that style is an aspect of writing that is superadded to the plain sense of a passage, and yet it is far from clear that these two things can ever be separated” (6). Scholarship that tends to focus on “Dickens’s relation to culture” insufficiently considers Dickens’s style of writing (7). Tyler is careful to say that while style can “have an independent life,” Dickens’s style “is meaningful and pertinent, more frequently than criticism tends to grant” (11).

Stewart makes this argument as rigorously as any in the volume. Attention to the intricacies of language, he suggests, is an antidote to our “professional epoch” in which the latest trend “is a so-called ethical turn that often, according to various agendas, turns us completely away from the written page and towards the imagined moral valences of character interaction, or really more like human interaction unmediated by text” (236). Stewart explains rather conclusively that his essay is meant “to speak sylleptically, ... to hold out for, and an example of something else: something like ethics, or at least the morale, of actually reading” (236).

Biographical Notice:

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