

SCRITTURE D'OLTREMANICA

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SCRITTURE D'OLTREMANICA
Collana diretta da Maria Teresa Chialant

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Il titolo della collana intende indicare sia l'area geografico-culturale alla quale si riferiscono i lavori qui ospitati, sia la direzione dello sguardo dei loro autori: dall'Italia alla Gran Bretagna.

Dickens's Signs, Readers' Designs

New Bearings in Dickens Criticism

edited by
Francesca Orestano and Norbert Lennartz

foreword by
Michael Hollington



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ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

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via Raffaele Garofalo, 133/A-B
00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-4767-5

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I edizione: maggio 2012

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Acknowledgements

The Editors would like first of all to thank the organising committee of the 2010 ESSE Conference and Pina Cortese of the Università degli Studi di Torino: two events on Dickens were then featured, the workshop “Towards the Bicentenary: New Bearings in Dickens’s Criticism,” and the round table on “European Crosscurrents: Dickens, Victorian Studies and the Global Horizon.” Both events, in which the contributors to this book took part, as well as many scholars, critics, teachers and students, showed the relevance of Dickens’s signs to the designs of modernity, and contemporary studies.

We would also like to express our gratitude to Michael Hollington for his unfaltering encouragement, and for tracing the ‘genesis’ of this volume in his Foreword, and to Maria Teresa Chialant for her support and kind advice with the process of publication.

Much of the editing work was done at the Universität Vechta and the Università degli Studi di Milano. We would like to remember here our colleagues of the Institut für Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften and the Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio e Letterature Straniere Compare. In particular, special thanks are due to Lisa Straube and Dana Jahn of Vechta, to Alessandro Vescovi, and to Claudia Cremonesi, Marco Canani and Angela Iuliucci, PhD students in English literature at the Università degli Studi di Milano, for their work in preparing our text for publication.

*Francesca Orestano
Norbert Lennartz*

Foreword

I have been asked to say a few words about the genesis of this book as a seminar on Dickens organised at the ESSE conference in Turin in August 2010 by its two editors, Francesca Orestano of the Università degli Studi di Milano in Italy and Norbert Lennartz of the University of Vechta in Germany, and to sketch in addition the ‘history’ of that seminar. I do so on the understanding that this ‘history’ is very slight, and worth recalling chiefly because it gives us another opportunity to remember the late, still very much lamented Sally Ledger of Royal Holloway College in London.

It was Sally who first had the idea of such a seminar. She in fact announced one for an ESSE conference some years back (I forget which one) which did not however materialise for lack of sufficient takers. Then in 2006 and 2007 we were together at the Dickens Universe Summer Project at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and in the course of discussions of this, that and other matters Dickensian we agreed to try again for ESSE Aarhus in 2008, this time as a duo.

But whilst this was very much in character for Sally – nothing if not a tirelessly positive and active promoter of all manner of ‘good ideas’ – she had forgotten a pledge to her family, that August was sacred holiday time, not to be encroached upon by anything academic, and so, most apologetically, decided later that she must withdraw. Again characteristically, however, she had a strong replacement to propose – one of the many former students she could rely upon to ‘die for her,’ so to speak – in the shape of Holly Furneaux, the author of *Queer Dickens* and now Reader in Victorian Literature at the University of Leicester. Holly also stepped in as co-editor of *Dickens in Context* for Cambridge University Press after Sally’s untimely decease.

So Holly and I did the necessary, getting together a small band of speakers on Dickens's impact in various European countries that included Francesca and Norbert. We were very much aided and abetted in setting it up by the overall organiser of the Aarhus conference, Dominic Rainsford, whom I had known hitherto as a Dickensian. A much bigger surprise was the presence at our seminar – and later in Turin – of the President of ESSE, Fernando Galván, then writing a book on Dickens, published in Spain and since favourably reviewed internationally.

Still, that was a pretty modest occasion, and it was felt that if any book might come out of it, this should wait until after the Turin occasion, which Francesca and Norbert agreed to organise with the aim of showing how up to date the Dickens work of critics on the European continent might be. I was not present on that occasion, but I gather it was a big success, building on the pioneer work of Aarhus and going well beyond it.

The current book indeed illustrates how Dickens at the time of his bicentenary is very much on the front burner for literary scholars. A wide variety of new critical approaches – many of them represented here – are currently being tried and tested, and will be the subject of lively debate at the numerous academic conferences advertised for the *annus mirabilis* 2012.

Amongst them there is ESSE 2012 in Istanbul, and I conclude my account of this 'history' with a sketch of the comedy of errors that has led to its engendering not one but three Dickens occasions! This time, Valerie Kennedy of Bilkent University in Ankara and Katerina Kitsi of the University of Thessaloniki had put forward a proposal for a seminar on 'Births, Marriages and Deaths' in Dickens, but technological gremlins decreed that the ESSE system in Istanbul to which it was sent went on the blink, and it was somehow never received. When the list of seminars for Istanbul was published, they found listed there another unrelated one, organised by Professor Umunc of the University of Istanbul and Yvonne Bezrucka of the University of Verona, and so decided to go ahead with their

own conference as a separate event, now to be held in Thessaloniki in October 2012. In the meantime, though, I was approached to organise an ESSE Dickens Round Table discussion in Istanbul on “Dickens, Past, Present and Future,” for which I have garnered a quartet of gurus – Dominic Rainsford, Victor Sage, Jeremy Tambling and myself. *O felix culpa!* But we hope things will run more smoothly for ESSE in Slovakia in 2014, and that the Dickens seminar inaugurated by Sally Ledger can then simply resume business as usual.

Michael Hollington

Francesca Orestano and Norbert Lennartz

Dickens's Signs, Readers' Designs
An Introduction

Dickens's signs have encouraged readers of various generations to see and to detect intricate designs in his texts. For a considerable span of time after Dickens's death, it was fashionable to reduce Dickens's signs to very simple patterns: in the light of the Zolaesque mode of Naturalism, Dickens was accused of being too sentimental and shunning the true sites of urban sordidness. In the light of the burgeoning movement of Modernism, Dickens was disparaged as being too traditional, one-sided and collusive in matters of Victorian taste. One of the figureheads of the Dickens bashers was E.M. Forster who pounced on Dickens's characters whom he criticised as being too one-dimensional and having the flatness of a gramophone record.¹ Forster's devastating criticism was echoed in German-speaking countries by Stefan Zweig's influential and ultimately damning book *Drei Meister: Balzac, Dickens und Dostojewski* which, on the one hand, elevated Dickens to the rank of one of the three masters of novel writing, but, on the other, used him as a negative foil to eulogise the merits of the other two. Thus, Dickens was not only described using epithets such as complacent, saturated and 'digestive,' he was also seen in terms of a Swiftian Gulliver who willingly allowed himself – as argued by

¹ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, London and New York, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1955, p. 71.

Norbert Lennartz in his essay – to be pinned down by the Lilliputians of Victorian culture.²

While writers of the early decades of the 20th century competed with each other in their anti-Dickensian views, the fact that T.S. Eliot originally intended to give his modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) the Dickensian title “He Do the Police in Different Voices” testifies to the incipient change in Dickens’s image since the 1920s. What Eliot seems to have sensed is that Dickens’s signs are anything but one-sided and reductionist, but are rather invested with a plurality of meaning which is not only modernist, but also eminently post-modernist.

Even more cogently and convincingly than Eliot, Virginia Woolf argued – throughout her criticism, memoirs, diaries, letters – that Dickens’s art of creating character was inimitable: his inexhaustible fertility, strengthened by the visual elements etched in his sketches and novels, is often discussed by Woolf in remarkable passages on the art of writing. London for Woolf, as for Dickens a few decades before her, was the endless source of a touching, energetic, adventurous *comédie humaine*, the core of dialectic contrasts between West End and East End, the eternal waltz of the new generations, always different and modern, yet always obeying the same old rhythm. When London suffered from intensive bombing, Woolf maintained that her only patriotism was the city of words built by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens.

More could be said for Wyndham Lewis, Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust – to name a few – and for all those novelists who, whilst involved with what they promoted as the ‘make it new’ of Modernism, studied Dickens without prejudice against him and his times. In England Wyndham Lewis, the guru of Vorticism, argued that the root of the comic resulted from “the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person:” he set the creation of Mr. Veneering alongside master-

² Stefan Zweig, *Drei Meister: Dickens, Balzac und Dostojewski*, Leipzig, Insel, 1923, p. 59.

pieces of satire such as Boswell's Johnson, Malvolio, Bouvard et Pécuchet, and indeed his 'wild bodies.'³

In 1931, Theodor W. Adorno was still a lone voice when he refused to read *The Old Curiosity Shop* in the vein of tear-jerking sentimentality and as a fairytale of a damsel in distress, but instead proposed interpreting the picaresque plot in the light of his thing theory, according to which Little Nell epitomises the objectification of man in the curiosity shop of rampant capitalism.⁴

From those early modernist acknowledgements of Dickens's achievement the first contribution stems quite logically, with the essay of Maria Teresa Chialant, who provides a rich and detailed critical assessment of the role things play in Dickens's texts, and of the critical theory investigating this area. With Chialant's essay not only the response to Dickens of early twentieth-century writers, but also the poetics of magic realism provide useful links in a chain of appreciation which has really never been interrupted.

In her essay, Chialant investigates the function Dickens attributes to objects in his fiction, either for the sheer pleasure of enumeration (Mr Snagsby's "blank forms of legal process" in *Bleak House*), or for its phonic dimension, as in the description of Krook's shop in the same novel, or for comic effects (famously in *The Pickwick Papers*). But the inundation of the narrative space with objects is never devoid of some ideological purpose: the critique of industrialism reduces human beings to mechanical, separate parts of the body. Dickens's signs make manifest what Chaplin would later show in *Modern Times*, and in this sense this essay aptly opens the collection, with the evidence that so much in Dickens is modern, and undergoes the same process of fragmentation and social atomisation which seems typical of modern societies.

³ Wyndham Lewis, *The Wild Body: A Soldier of Humour and Other Stories*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1927, pp. 234-35.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, "Rede über den alten Raritätenladen." Translated into English by Michael Hollington in *Dickens Quarterly* (1989), pp. 95-101.